

Social Infrastructure is Essential Infrastructure

How public spaces make the affordable, joyful city possible



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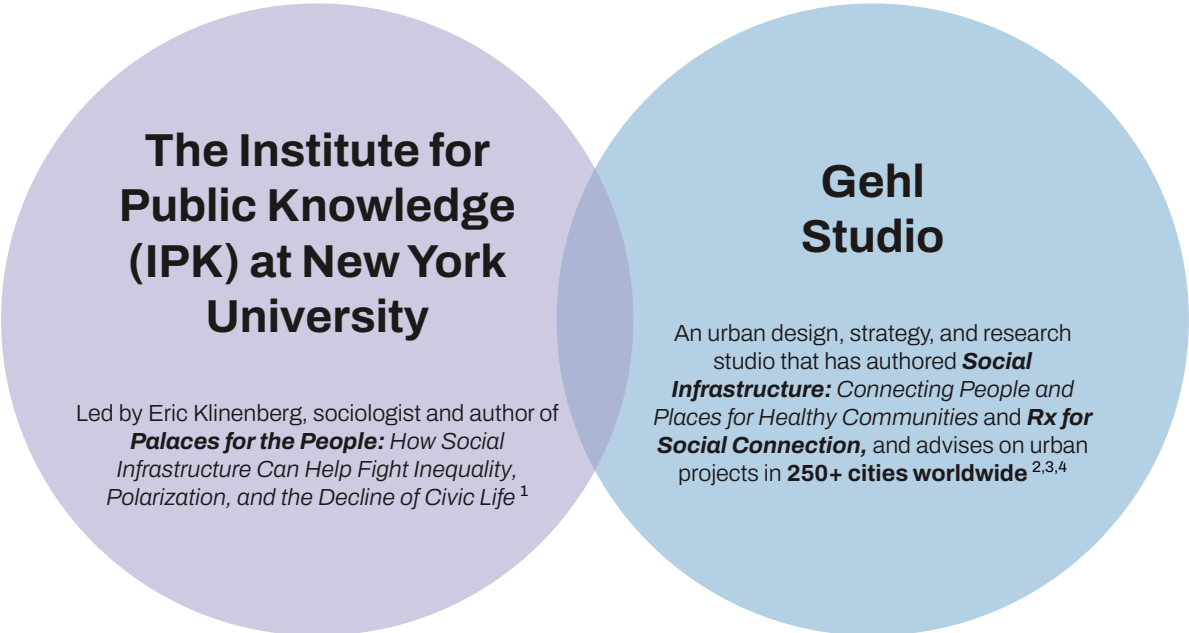
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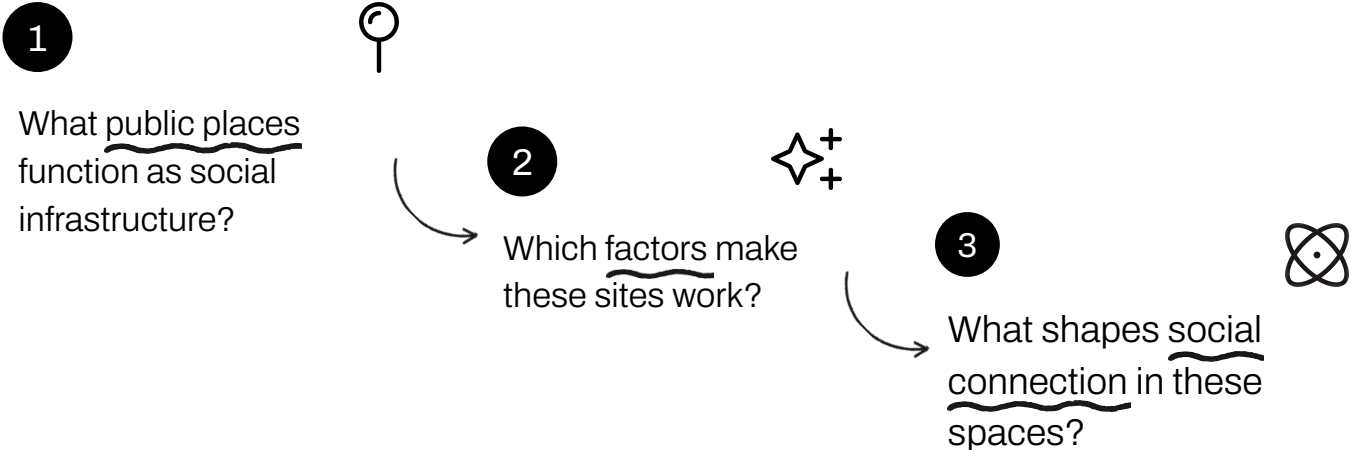
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A team of social scientists engaged, observed, and surveyed New Yorkers to understand how they used public gathering spaces. We refer to these places as social infrastructure — the physical places that shape our capacity to interact.



The research focuses on understanding:



The IPK + Gehl team conducted over a year of in-depth, mixed-methods research across three New York communities.



1,100+ individuals surveyed



127 community stakeholders engaged



These spaces make people feel **more connected to their communities** in many different ways. These are not just nice-to-have amenities; they are **essential infrastructure for individual and collective health.**

Key Survey Findings on the Social Connection Outcomes of Social Infrastructure Sites

Trust
More than 70% feel that others are willing to help one another



Community

Bridging
More than 50% report cross-racial or cross-ethnic interactions

More than 35% report cross-class interactions

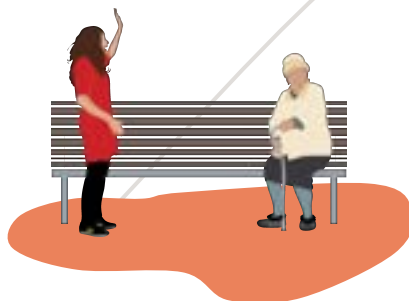
Befriending
More than 35% of people made new friends



Relationships

Belonging
More than 80% feel a sense of belonging

Recognition
More than 70% recognize at least a few individuals



Familiarity

Sense of Connection
More than 60% feel less alone or isolated

Engagement
More than 40% of respondents engage in joint activities

The study revealed what it takes for social infrastructure to have an **impact at different scales.**

1 Human Needs

People seek out social infrastructure spaces to meet everyday needs — to rest, create, learn, play — in a social environment.

More starting on page 14

2 Site Needs

These spaces need meaningful resources for features like design, programming, and operations in order to remain effective.

More starting on page 27

3 Neighborhood Needs

A diverse mix of high-quality, accessible spaces expands opportunities for the social connections that form healthy, resilient societies.

More starting on page 36

Civic Outcomes

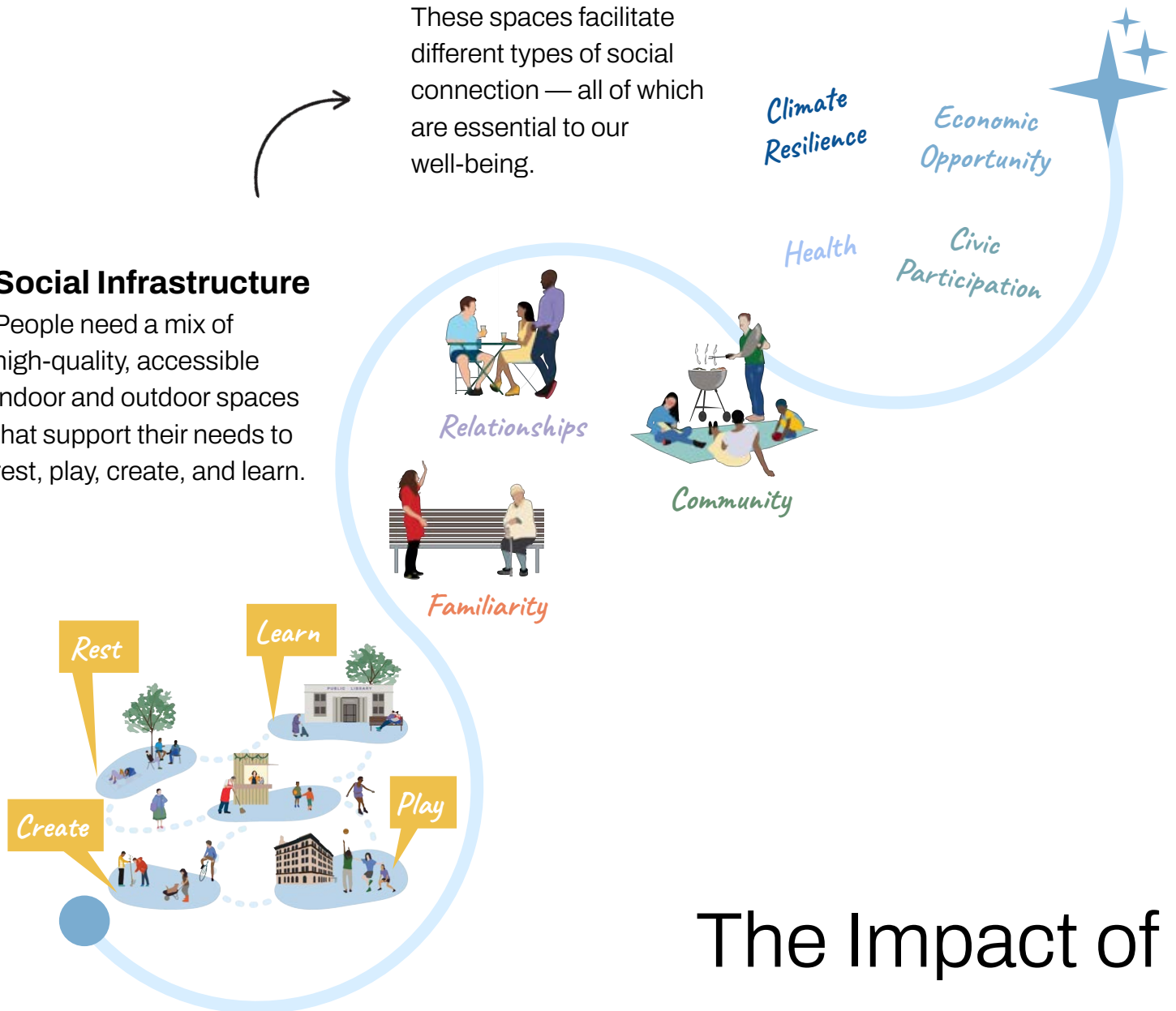
These spaces and the social connections they foster contribute to a more equal society.

Social Connection

These spaces facilitate different types of social connection — all of which are essential to our well-being.

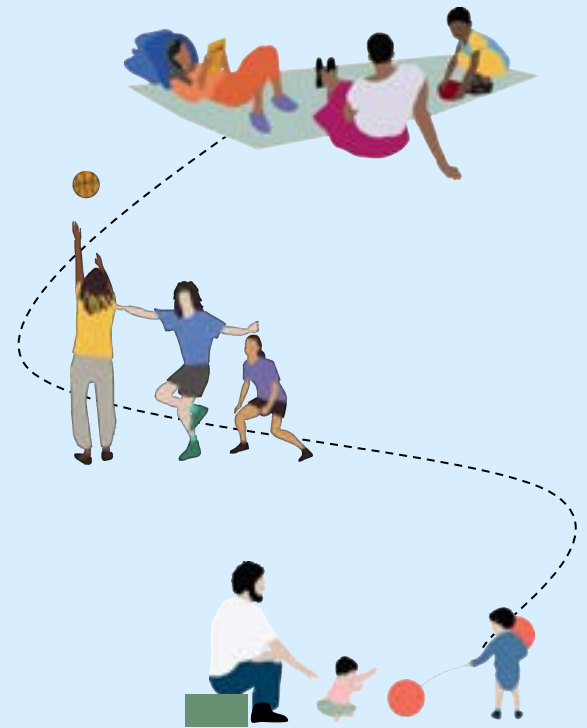
Social Infrastructure

People need a mix of high-quality, accessible indoor and outdoor spaces that support their needs to rest, play, create, and learn.



The Impact of Social Infrastructure

Where's your go-to picnic spot? Your favorite pick-up basketball court? The closest playground your child raves about?



Chances are, these are in public spaces, which play a crucial role in making city living more convenient, communal, and affordable. Spaces like parks, libraries, recreation centers, streets, plazas, and community gardens form the backbone of a city's public social infrastructure — the physical places that shape our capacity to interact. These are the spaces where community begins: where you nod to a familiar face, play a game of chess, throw a block party with your neighbors, or simply wait for the bus.

In an era marked by deepening political polarization, declining trust in institutions, dire need for affordable housing, and fears of social isolation, the importance of shared physical space has taken on renewed urgency. Across many societies, people are increasingly separated — by income, identity, ideology, and digital life. In New York and around the world, many are worrying about where they'll live, the safety and quality of public transportation, and access to affordable food, childcare, and medical care. These are essential

components of livability, but meeting these fundamental needs is not enough to make a city livable; people need places to coexist and gather outside of home and work. Everyday public places are among the few settings where people encounter difference in informal, humanizing ways. As Jan Gehl has written since the 1960s, public life in well-designed public spaces is fundamental to safe, enjoyable urban life: it is where we see and are seen, where coexistence becomes tangible, and where we practice shared civic culture through

everyday interactions.⁵

Research shows that the spaces that bring us together help us weather many crises. Investing in the social infrastructure that supports public life is one of the most effective ways to strengthen communities from within. In a series of influential sociological books and research projects, including *Palaces for the People* and *Heat Wave*,⁶ Eric Klinenberg has demonstrated how social infrastructure fosters democratic participation, economic opportunity, and social mobility, as well as how it can make neighborhoods better connected and more resilient in times of crises. While the return on investment of public space can appear less tangible than that of services like housing or food security, it is essential for a healthy, democratic, resilient society. Despite this, social infrastructure faces key challenges across North America.

There is a gap between what people need and what they can access. For example, recreational facilities and programming once made up nearly one-third of the NYC Parks budget. Today it represents around 5%.⁷

There is a gap in access between neighborhoods, with social infrastructure unevenly distributed based on demographic factors. For example, in a study of the 100 largest U.S. cities, neighborhoods where most residents are people of color have about 44% less park space than predominantly white neighborhoods. Low-income neighborhoods average 42% less park acreage per person than high-income neighborhoods.⁸

There is a gap between what people value and what their elected officials and civil servants deliver. For example, 84% of New York City residents believe libraries should receive an increase in funding, though the budget for the city's three public library systems hovers at less than 0.5% of the city's budget.⁹

There is a gap in processes and resources that make it easy and sustainable for communities to program and steward public spaces, as many often encounter cumbersome permits and insurance requirements.

There is a gap in how the private sector actors who benefit from quality public spaces are expected to contribute to it. For example, an Emory University study revealed how U.S. cities that invested \$10 million in public spaces (e.g., pedestrian streets and bike lanes) saw a 10% increase in nearby property values.¹⁰

These gaps persist despite the well-documented benefits of public space to public health, social integration, climate resilience, and more. Parks and public spaces frequently rely on piecemeal funding and stewardship models, resulting in stark disparities in quality and access between neighborhoods. Without sustained public investment and coordinated leadership, these spaces cannot fulfill their full civic potential.

Study Overview

This report responds to these challenges and opportunities by examining how social infrastructure

functions across three distinct New York communities — the Lower East Side, Flatbush, and Poughkeepsie — and identifying what makes these spaces successful. Through a mixed-methods approach using public life observation, surveys, community engagement, and spatial analysis, the research explores three core questions:

- What public **places** function as social infrastructure?
- Which **factors** — design, programming, operations, funding, and more — make these sites work?
- What shapes **social connection** in these spaces?

This work informs recommendations and a framework for policymakers, practitioners and advocates interested in improving how cities plan, design, and manage social infrastructure as connected neighborhood spaces that support everyday life.

The interdisciplinary research team brings together NYU's Institute for Public Knowledge, led by Klinenberg, and Gehl, a global urban design practice focused on public life. Klinenberg's work provides the theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding why social infrastructure matters. Gehl's research — including a recent global study of social infrastructure — demonstrates how different types of places collectively support everyday social life.²

One key finding in Gehl's study was that social infrastructure can be grouped into three types, organized

around different social outcomes:

- Hangouts are spaces for people of all backgrounds to linger and spend time in coexistence with each other.
- Havens are spaces for people to build deep relationships, often around shared identity.
- Hubs are spaces where people can build community through experiences that bridge different backgrounds.

Together, these place types form an ecosystem that supports both the practical and social dimensions of daily life.

Findings

The findings of this study build on this knowledge, revealing how public social infrastructure is best positioned for outcomes when it meets basic human, site, and neighborhood needs:

- **Human Needs:** People seek out social infrastructure spaces to meet everyday needs — to rest, create, learn, play — in a social environment.
- **Site Needs:** These spaces need meaningful resources for features like design, programming, and operations in order to remain effective.
- **Neighborhood Needs:** A diverse mix of high-quality, accessible spaces expands opportunities for the social connections that form healthy, resilient societies.

Successful social infrastructure is defined by a variety of accessible,

welcoming indoor and outdoor spaces embedded within neighborhoods. At their best, they function as a system of everyday destinations — places where people do what they need to do and love to do. These essential functions draw people in; social benefits follow.

This aligns with emerging policy directions that call for treating different social infrastructure sites — parks, libraries, streets, recreation centers and more — as a mutually reinforcing civic system. One where transportation corridors double as social spaces, parks become ecological classrooms, and libraries become social safe havens.

Recommendations

Realizing this vision of connected and interdependent public spaces requires social infrastructure be treated as essential urban infrastructure — meaning it is planned, funded, and governed with the same seriousness as housing, transportation, and utilities.

This includes developing new and creative mechanisms for funding social infrastructure capital, operating and stewardship expenses. It also requires intentional study and planning, with local partners, at the neighborhood level to understand where there are gaps in access and quality. With new funding and planning paradigms, cities should:

- Supercharge the library
- Revamp recreation and play spaces for all ages
- Make our gathering spaces comfortable and resilient for

extreme weather

- Transform streets into safe, social neighborhood connectors
- Hire and partner with communities to run and activate public spaces
- Assess neighborhood needs and fill gaps

These upgrades to social infrastructure can deliver by improving people's everyday lives. As a visible neighborhood investment, social infrastructure aligns with the agendas of many mayors, including New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani's results-oriented first 100 days in office.

To invest in these places is to commit to the social fabric that underpins more equal societies. These are the places where democracy is not an abstract concept, but something lived through everyday encounters, shared experiences, and collective presence in public life. They are places where trust is built, where differences are negotiated, and where a sense of common ground can emerge.

No matter the context, the promise is clear: by providing essential services and extraordinary experiences in convenient locations, social infrastructure makes both the affordable and the joyful city possible. Today, in societies across the planet, we need these spaces and the people who run them more than ever.

Six recommendations for how to invest in upstream democracy and make the more joyful, affordable city possible.

Supercharge the library



Revamp play and recreational spaces for all ages



Make our gathering spaces comfortable and resilient for extreme weather



Transform streets into safe, social neighborhood connectors



Hire and partner with communities to run and activate public spaces



Assess neighborhood social infrastructure needs and fill gaps



Study Overview

This study sought to identify the key drivers of successful social infrastructure networks

Social infrastructure spaces are the physical places that shape our capacity to interact, including libraries, parks, playgrounds, community organizations, recreation centers, and streets. When well-supported, these spaces foster everyday social connections that strengthen communities and contribute to broader civic outcomes. Yet across the United States, social infrastructure is often under-funded, fragmented, and undervalued. Limited funding, siloed systems, and a lack of coordinated long-term planning result in networks that are insufficient, disconnected, and difficult to sustain.

This study seeks to bridge the gap between our needs for social infrastructure and the resources allocated to it. Building on prior research — including Eric Klinenberg’s *Palaces for the People*, the U.S. Surgeon General’s 2023 report on loneliness, and Gehl’s global study on “Havens, Hubs & Hangouts” — the project advances a more holistic understanding of how social infrastructure functions and how its value can be better measured, supported, and sustained.^{1,2,10}

Study Locations



It identifies a practical framework and policy recommendations that city leaders and practitioners can apply.

Led by NYU’s Institute for Public Knowledge and Gehl, the research explores three core questions: (1) What public places function as social infrastructure?; (2) Which factors — design, programming, operations, funding, and more — make these sites work?; (3) What shapes social connection in these spaces?

Focusing on New York State, the team developed profiles of 14 potential study areas across New York City, Western and Central New York, and the Hudson Valley. From these, three communities — the Lower East Side, Flatbush, and Poughkeepsie, with a focus on Downtown and the North Side —

were selected for in-depth analysis. Working closely with local partners and community leaders, the team examined 35 sites using a mixed-methods approach.

Drawing on a review of existing social infrastructure indicators, the study developed an assessment framework to evaluate how design, programming, maintenance, and funding shape social connection. By combining multimethod research designed by IPK’s sociologists and Gehl’s urban planners — including quantitative analysis with field research and observation — the research documents patterns and on-the-ground realities related to how people use social infrastructure and how the quality of social infrastructure impacts a range of social connection outcomes.

Methods Snapshot

Additional Detail in Appendix

Public Life Observation

3,080 people observed

Stationary visitor activities — including perceived age and gender, posture, group setting, and activity — were recorded anonymously using the Gehl Public Life App to understand who is present at social infrastructure sites and how they spend time there.

Survey

1,100+ individuals surveyed

A 23-question survey was administered to visitors of 21 social infrastructure sites to examine the types and depth of social connections formed at each site.

Interviews

98 interviewees

Interviews with residents, site operators, and community leaders were conducted to understand the level of social connection, operating model, the quality and needs of social infrastructure sites.

Public Space Assessment

28 sites

Spatial quality indicators related to the site's design, programming, and maintenance were assessed to understand the physical conditions of social infrastructure sites.



Focus Groups

3 focus groups

Focus groups with 2-6 residents were conducted in each study location to understand how key stakeholder groups experience and perceive social infrastructure within their communities.

Mapping

12 space types

Distinct social infrastructure space types, ranging from parks and playgrounds to streets and plazas, were mapped based on publicly available datasets and on-site research.

Eye Level City

3 workshops

Groups of 5-14 residents participated in photo-journaling walks, followed by post-walk workshops, to share their lived experiences and perceptions of local social infrastructure sites.

People seek out social infrastructure spaces to meet everyday needs — to rest, create, learn, play — in a social environment.



Social infrastructure sites take **many different forms.**

In this study, focus was on public, physical sites. From indoor to outdoor, these play essential roles as public spaces that bring people together, from simply being in the same place while waiting for the bus to playing a pick-up sport with strangers. These spaces complement housing and social services by making neighborhoods livable and providing key outlets for intergenerational and diverse social connections.



Libraries



Parks



Plazas



Streets & Sidewalks



Community & Recreation Centers



Play Spaces



Sport Courts & Fields



Swimming Pools



Community Gardens



Skateparks



Transit Stops

And more! Social infrastructure takes shape in different forms depending on the context.

Characteristics of Social Infrastructure

1

Indoor / Outdoor

Indoor sites provide shelter and are often climate-controlled (e.g., libraries, community centers). Outdoor sites are open-air (e.g., parks, playgrounds, skateparks, dog parks).



Tompkins Square Library, Lower East Side



Pershing Avenue Park, Poughkeepsie

2

Public / Semi-public

Public sites are open to all. Semi-public sites are generally accessible to all but may require participation, membership, or patronage (e.g., recreation centers, community gardens).



6 & B Community Garden, Lower East Side

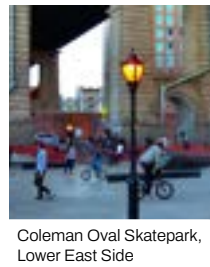


Manny Cantor Center, Lower East Side

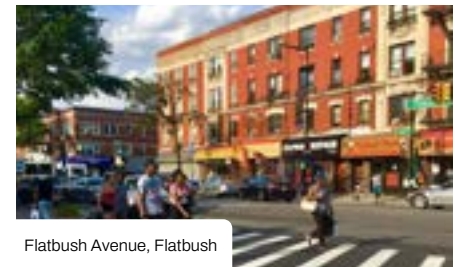
3

Place / Connector

Places have defined edges and are designed for people to stay. Connectors are linear spaces that link places and are designed primarily for movement, often taking the form of streets, sidewalks, or multi-modal transit corridors.



Coleman Oval Skatepark, Lower East Side



Flatbush Avenue, Flatbush

4

Size

Small sites like pocket parks (<0.25 acres) often serve hyper-local needs (~quarter-mile); medium sites like neighborhood parks (0.25–5 acres) often support general recreation (~quarter- to one-mile); large sites like destination parks (5+ acres) often draw users from a mile or beyond.



Pier 35, Lower East Side



Lt. Federico Narvaez Tot Lot, Flatbush

5

Typology

This study examined many different typologies of social infrastructure, listed on the previous page, such as parks, community gardens, play spaces, recreation facilities, plazas, basketball courts, libraries, streets/sidewalks, skateparks, and public markets.



Malcolm X Park, Poughkeepsie



Essex Market, Lower East Side

At their core, these spaces foster **activities** **people need** **and love to do.**

While physical social infrastructure may look different depending on the neighborhood, the key is that it provides affordable, enjoyable, social, and convenient gathering places where people can do the essential activities of everyday life. The activities essential to their physical and mental health. Or as Jan Gehl described in *Life Between Buildings*, the “necessary” activities like commuting to work, studying, and caregiving, as well as the “optional,” like leisurely resting.⁵

Our research found that the clusters of activities people engaged in centered around **four broad activities: resting, playing, creating, and learning.** All of these activities happen in the company of others — they’re fun *and* functional — giving people what they need to survive and thrive.

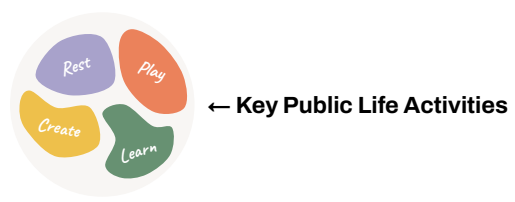
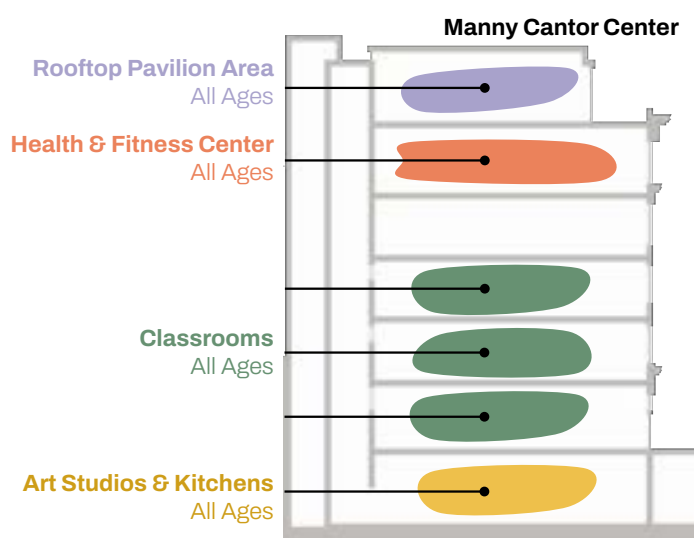
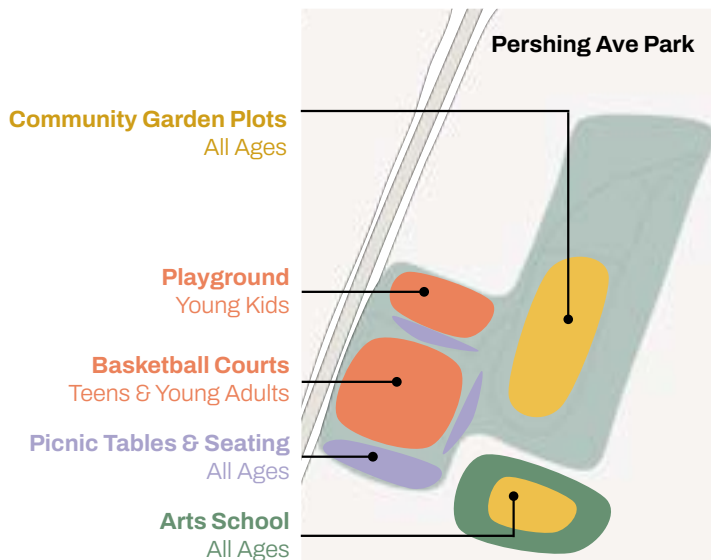
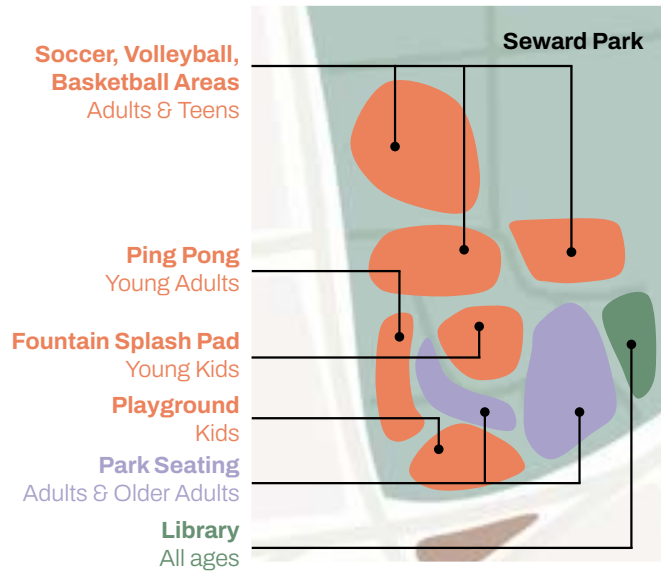


Multiple activities co-located or offered in proximity reach a wider audience.

Whether in a permanent public space or a temporary event, clustering areas for different activities encourages people of different backgrounds to mix more easily and participate in shared activities. Seward Park in the Lower East Side has different “rooms,” each of which caters to different age groups based on observation.

At Pershing Avenue Park in Poughkeepsie, the mix of side-by-side activities, from the community garden to the basketball courts and the neighboring art school encourages interaction across ages, from youth to seniors, and across cultures, bringing together local residents and artists.

Indoor spaces like the Manny Cantor Center in the Lower East Side and Seward Park Library also foster age diversity through dedicated zones like teen rooms. Seward Park Library had the most age-diverse visitors overall during public life observation.



Rest

Sometimes the most valuable role of social infrastructure is to offer a place to relax, warm up, or cool off — especially in extreme weather and in an increasingly anxious and unpredictable world.

→

Half of the people observed across all social infrastructure sites were seated or lying down.



Cooling off in the shade

Parks
Waryas Park, Poughkeepsie



Warming up from a cold stroll

Libraries
Cortelyou Library, New York City



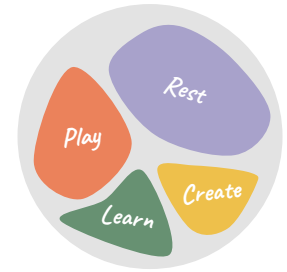
Waiting for the bus

Bus Stops
Flatbush Ave, New York City



Taking a beat

Open Streets
34th Ave Paseo Park, New York City



Field Notes

Pershing Ave Park

Stewarded by New City Parks, Scenic Hudson, and the City

“Pershing Park has been so utilized by kids. Every day I leave, and I immediately smile, because it's just ball games going on, and that's what should happen in a park. So I'm like, yes, the parks are being utilized by their intended users now.”

– Nicole Fenichel-Hewitt, Executive Director, Art Effect

With revamped basketball courts, a new playground, and a new community farm, Pershing Avenue Park is beginning to develop a better reputation on Poughkeepsie's North Side. The recent work of non-profit organizations like Scenic Hudson has improved park conditions. Increased programming has led to more people beginning to view Pershing as a safe recreational space.

As recently as 2024, the park was a site where people would pass out on the new basketball courts and picnic tables. Pershing was a site known for violent crime, overdoses, and other unwelcome incidents. “Last year was much worse,” said one source at a nearby non-profit. “More people shouting and sometimes cursing out people who were trying to use the park.” Through police sweeps and more regular programming, the number of incidents in the park has significantly declined.

A typical week at Pershing is still quiet, but park use has steadily increased. Teenagers and young men frequently use the basketball courts, and a handful of unhoused people are often relaxing at the picnic tables. Much like the rest of the city's public

realm, the playground is often empty, but recent free art activities (Crazy Over Art) for Poughkeepsie youth have led to regular visits from groups of children from nearby daycare facilities. Scenic Hudson's weekly farm stand, held every Tuesday during the summer from 4 to 6 PM, was another modest-sized program that yielded positive results in 2025. The farm's staff handed out free fresh produce to 30-40 people each week, with about a third also checking on their garden plots. It is clear that the farm had developed a small but loyal group of regulars who became increasingly invested in Pershing's future. Improvements to the park's day-to-day use still vary, but more residents are cautiously optimistic in regarding Pershing Avenue Park as a social infrastructure site.

Play

From organized sports to free play with friends and neighbors, spaces for play at every age help keep bodies and minds active and healthy, and create more equitable access to recreation.



Over 25% of the people observed across all social infrastructure sites in the Lower East Side were engaged in play or exercise.



Shooting hoops

Image source: Manny Cantor Center

Recreation Centers

Manny Cantor Center, New York City



Play around

Image source: Street Lab

Streets

Play Street, New York City



Catching up over cards



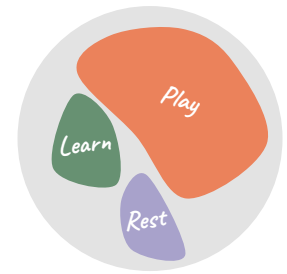
Do a trick

Image source: Sure Thing

Skateparks

LES Coleman Skatepark, New York City

Parks
Seward Park, New York City



Field Notes

Tompkins Square Skatepark Stewarded by NYC Parks

Image source: Sophie Day

Tompkins Square Skatepark, located in the northwest corner of Tompkins Square Park, has a remarkable ability to bring together New Yorkers of different races, classes, and neighborhoods around a shared passion. Weather permitting, the park fills with mostly young men navigating the blacktop obstacles. Between runs, skaters gather along benches and the fence line, talking and watching others ride. These in-between moments reveal that the park functions as far more than a place to skate.

For many participants, the skatepark serves as a critical social node where enduring friendships are formed and maintained — particularly significant at a time when young men struggle to

build and sustain close relationships. Skateboarding itself is largely solitary and can technically be practiced almost anywhere. Skate parks, however, concentrate a city's skaters in one place, transforming individual activity into a shared event and connecting people who might otherwise remain isolated.

Conversations with skaters over several months highlighted how strongly many view Tompkins as a surrogate home — a reliable, welcoming environment where relationships can develop and support networks can form. Local NYU students from New York University often ride alongside teenagers who travel from the outer boroughs, sometimes building unlikely but

meaningful friendships. Skate culture has long attracted young people who feel like outsiders, and many skaters described how the community at Tompkins helped fill gaps in their personal lives.

Within this environment, social support frequently extends beyond the park itself. Skaters often counsel one another through struggles with addiction, share job leads, or offer temporary places to stay when housing becomes uncertain. In this way, the skate park operates not only as a recreational facility but also as a site where new social ties are created and an informal safety net emerges for those at risk of slipping through the cracks.

Learn

From storytime at childcare to ecological education, these spaces are critical to our intellectual development.

“

We provide the support families need to create safe, nurturing environments where kids can grow and learn.

Tom Lawrence, Executive Director,
Poughkeepsie Public Library District



*Daycare
and pre-K*

Image source: Manny Cantor Center

Community Centers
Manny Cantor Center, New York City



*Study
buddies*

Libraries
Flatbush Library, New York City



*Nature-based
Learning*

Image source: Scenic Hudson

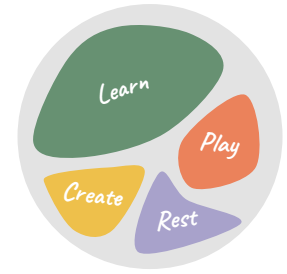
Parks
Malcolm X Park, Poughkeepsie



Community Gardens
La Plaza Cultural, New York City



Key Public Life Activities



Field Notes

Adriance Memorial Library

Stewarded by Poughkeepsie Public Library District

Image source: Poughkeepsie Public Library District

Adriance Memorial Library, the main branch of the Poughkeepsie Public Library District, is one of the most active and diverse sites of social infrastructure in Poughkeepsie. It provides essential services to residents through its print and media collections, a temperature-controlled environment, free and reliable Wi-Fi, public restrooms, and free summer meals for children. Beyond these core services, the library regularly fosters meaningful social interaction through a wide range of programs.

Adriance hosts preschool learning classes, storytime sessions, teen activities, local history meetings, and computer classes that bring together residents from across the city and the surrounding region. During

observations of children’s programs in the spring and summer, attendance typically included 15–20 children accompanied by parents or caregivers. Librarians and parents noted that most participants come from the city of Poughkeepsie, while many others travel from nearby communities such as the town of Poughkeepsie, Highland Falls, and Wappingers Falls.

Among the public spaces observed over several months, the library stood out as both the most diverse and the most consistent site where people from different backgrounds interact. Regular programming allows parents and children to meet and form relationships with people they would not otherwise encounter. Some families arrive with friends or

neighbors, while others rely on connections formed in the library’s children’s section.

Given Poughkeepsie’s longstanding class- and race-based divisions, the library’s role as a welcoming and safe place for social connection is particularly significant. Although patrons and staff sometimes express concern about the presence of unhoused individuals, this does not appear to affect library use in the way it does in other public spaces nearby. Broader fears about crime and drug use often discourage residents from using public spaces in Poughkeepsie, yet such concerns were mentioned only rarely in relation to Adriance. Even with minimal security, most patrons report feeling safe inside the library.

Create

From growing plants to making ceramics, these spaces connect people to their creative instincts and passions.

“

One of the main projects we launched was the Saturday park events to bring families into the park to do fun things: to enjoy music, create art, learn about resources, but mostly just creating opportunities to see their neighbors.

Melissa Aase, CEO of University Settlement



Making pottery

Image source: Manny Cantor Center

Community Centers

Manny Cantor Center, New York City



Sharing your craft

Streets

Flatbush Avenue, New York City



Cultivating food

Image source: Scenic Hudson

Community Gardens

Pershing Ave Community Farm, Poughkeepsie



Tai Chi

Parks

Seward Park, New York City



Key Public Life Activities:



Field Notes

Manny Cantor Center Stewarded by Educational Alliance

Image source: Manny Cantor Center

At 197 East Broadway, the Manny Cantor Center operates less like a single institution than a valve matrix in the Lower East Side’s circulatory system. As Educational Alliance’s flagship Lower East Side site, it houses countless overlapping uses: a preschool drawing children from different economic backgrounds, a renovated teen center sharing hallways with a senior center, an art school, and a 7,000 square-foot fitness facility. The center’s gut renovation in 2014 created a LEED-certified space explicitly designed to generate “meaningful encounters among neighbors.”

A parent dropping off a toddler at 8AM crosses paths with an older adult heading to a wellness session. A teen

arriving for an after-school program encounters a worker stopping in for an evening ceramics class. On the sixth floor, seniors eat lunch in the glass-enclosed community space where, hours later, evening dance lessons or panel discussions draw a different crowd. Over time, repeated encounters generate what resilient neighborhoods need: familiarity, weak ties, practical trust.

Housed in a Romanesque Revival building in continuous use since 1890, the Manny Cantor Center carries forward the settlement-house tradition while adapting to contemporary realities. Educational Alliance has served the Lower East Side since 1889, first Eastern European Jewish immigrants, now all residents —

regardless of background or income. That combination gives the center unusual legitimacy, being rooted enough to feel trusted, but dynamic enough to stay relevant.

The center also functions as a low-threshold civic anchor. Multiple entry points — fitness, arts, education, family support, cultural events — draw residents who might not connect to more formal institutions. A family may enter through childcare, then stay for pottery or basketball. The center delivers services and creates a platform for sustained belonging, upholding neighborhood public life by creating conditions for repeated contact across difference. It functions as an everyday commons where social connection is a practiced, recurring fact.

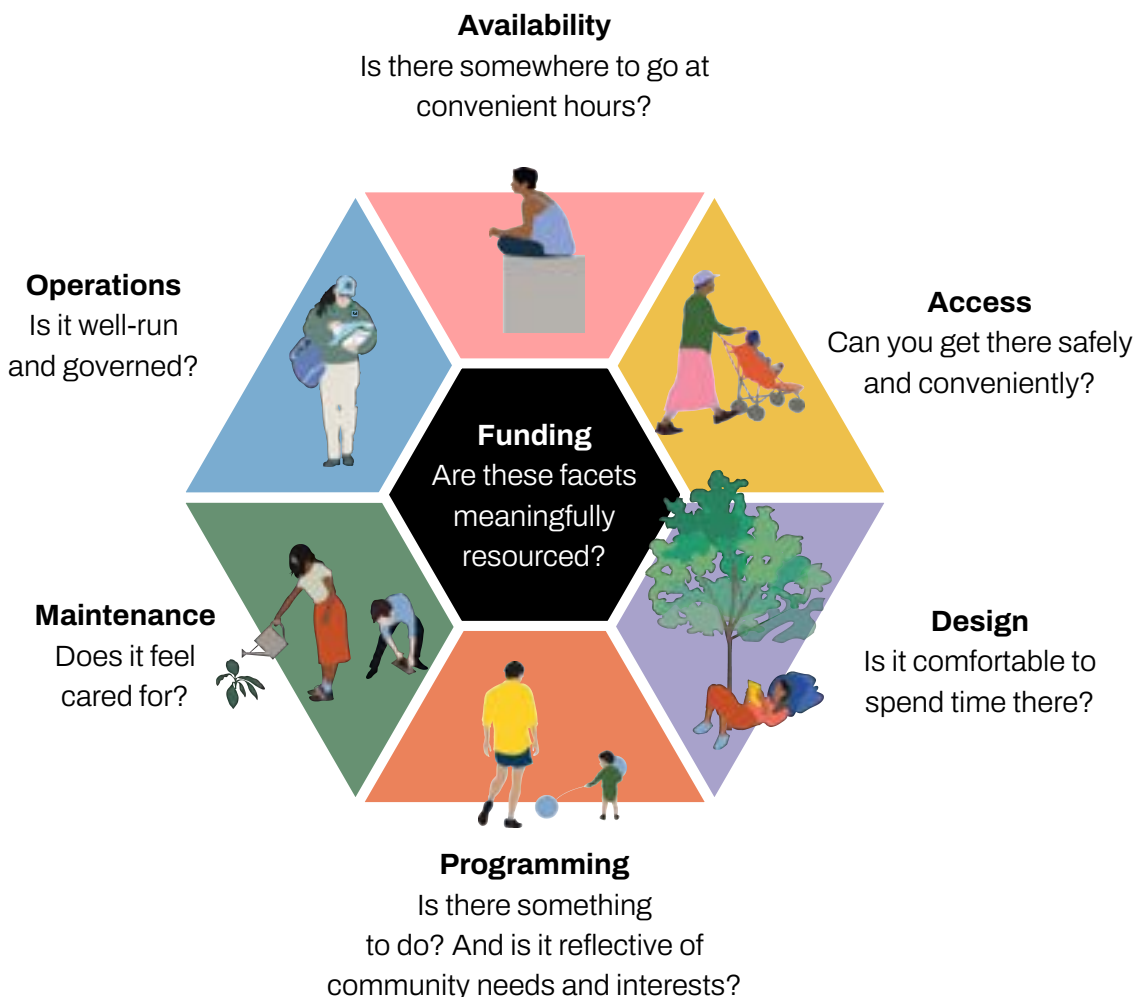
These spaces need meaningful resources for features like design, programming, and operations to remain effective.



Effective social infrastructure relies on **funding for the physical space and the people who care for and program it.**

Across the sites studied, the most active and socially diverse places shared a common foundation: they were readily available, easily accessed, comfortably designed, active with a mix of invitations, and consistently cared for and governed. All of these details rely on consistent funding for the resources that make these sites work. Read on for findings on how these different factors are reflected in spaces across the three communities studied.

Ingredients of Effective Social Infrastructure



People value having a mix of indoor and outdoor spaces that meet different needs.



A variety of social infrastructure options in convenient locations drives use and meets diverse needs.

Social infrastructure sites come in different forms. Embracing this diversity is key, since spaces play distinct roles depending on the season, neighborhood, or person. For example, workshops in the Lower East Side found that many teens prefer LES Coleman Skatepark and the East River Waterfront to Seward Park — even if (or maybe because) that park is a major draw for adults, younger kids, and seniors.

The siting of these spaces for optimal convenience and regular visits is critical. Most visitors to these sites are coming from nearby and visiting often. For example, 10 minutes is the median time it takes for survey respondents to get to the site (with the exception of 20 minutes for outdoor sites in less dense Poughkeepsie). 90% of respondents across all communities had previously visited the site. People visit often, too; for outdoor spaces in the Lower East Side and Flatbush, respondents reported going 4-5 times a week.

A lack of quality indoor spaces leads young people to stay at home or engage in unsafe activity.

Interviewees repeatedly cited the risks of insufficient indoor space for young people — a risk well-documented in previous research.^{12,13} In Poughkeepsie, funding shortfalls and long-term closures are to blame. The planned Youth Opportunity Union near Downtown is at a standstill, following the 2009 closure of the Dutchess YMCA and the 2020 closure of the Catharine Street Community Center building. While sites like the Family Partnership Center continue to function as youth hubs, they face tight budgets and access barriers that reduce participation. Over time, this erosion has created a generational gap in both access to and awareness of community centers. L’Quette Taylor, Founder and CEO of Community Matters 2, says “I have a 19-year-old son. He knows nothing of a community center. He has no idea what it is. I’m like, man. That’s where you did everything. That’s where everything happened.”

To be there you need to get there. Weak spatial links and opaque edges deter use.



Access to social infrastructure is more difficult without safe, convenient connections.

In Poughkeepsie, interviewees and focus group participants identified high-speed arterial roads — where multiple pedestrian injuries and fatalities occur — as barriers for young people reaching key sites like the Family Partnership Center. For example, the 25-minute walk from the local high school requires crossing two arterials, discouraging everyday visits on foot.

Similarly, Lower East Side teens described the waterfront as a favorite hangout, but the photos they submitted from Eye Level City walks revealed that ongoing construction made crossings stressful and difficult. These barriers make it harder for people to visit sites, even if they are proximate.



Street experience matters — building facades and edges of indoor sites can invite or deter.

While indoor social infrastructure is essential, unwelcoming or poorly oriented exterior edges can discourage use. For example, the plaza outside the updated Caribbean Marketplace in Flatbush sees little activity (just 23 people over 5 hours) despite the market’s cultural and historical significance. The former market featured warm, colorful facades and window bays oriented toward Flatbush Avenue, while the renovated building has cool, monochrome facades of glass and steel, with entrances tucked onto a side street away from the main avenue. In a place where the local community already perceives problems — interviews revealed avoidance of the market due to lack of affordability and inauthenticity — low-quality building edge conditions compound access challenges.

Features that keep people comfortable invite them in and extend their stays.



Comfortable seating encourages people to spend time in a place.

In Seward Park, plentiful seating — benches, ledges, and library steps — invites people to rest and connect; three out of five visitors are seated.

In Flatbush, limited seating signals that gathering is not encouraged, contributing to comparably low satisfaction in the sites (78% vs. 90% elsewhere) and less on-site socializing, despite frequent recognition among residents. As Rona Taylor of CXSE Brooklyn CDC notes, “Any kind of seating where people can just sit and relax really matters. There isn’t much of that in the community, and people often feel discouraged from gathering.”

Prior Gehl research on public space interventions at The Bentway in Toronto found that 71% of survey respondents said that public seating enhanced their meaningful interactions.³ While seating is not new to urban design guidelines, this new research highlights its importance for more than physical comfort.



Exposure to microclimate (such as heat or cold) determines whether people use public spaces.

Visitors to Seward Park value shade and fresh air, often gathering under trees and the air-conditioned interiors of the Seward Park Library. When surveyed, many cited “cooling down in summer,” “getting fresh air,” and “being with the community” as primary reasons for visiting, underscoring how shade and thermal comfort encourage people to stay, rest, and socialize.

By contrast, Flatbush Avenue offers little shade or shelter, despite serving as a major corridor for neighborhood activity in an area with limited green space. Exposed sidewalks and unsheltered bus stops provide few comfortable places to pause, forcing residents and transit riders to hang out in the sun. At night, inconsistent lighting along the corridor deters use even further, particularly for women, whose presence tends to decline after dark and cluster in better-lit areas.

Everyday low or no-cost activities are most effective at generating consistent use.



Everyday, self-organized activity is the key to consistent visits — not once-in-a-blue-moon festivals.

Seward Park clearly demonstrates the value of everyday programming: informal dance groups and ping-pong competitions draw steady, age-diverse participation, with children, teens, adults, and seniors regularly sharing the space. Observations show that 60% of park users are non-adults, including 10% children under the age of 12 — closely reflecting neighborhood demographics.

In contrast, while Poughkeepsie residents value large festivals and one-off events, many emphasized the need for more consistent, accessible programming. Estefany Umbach of Day One Early Learning Community noted that empowering residents to help sustain public spaces and activities could strengthen everyday community use.

Free or low-cost programming is more likely to invite the whole neighborhood, rather than expensive events.

Cost of entry shapes who participates. Observations showed a greater diversity of ages and activities when programs offered were free or low-cost — such as storytime at the library, tai chi in the park, and community cookouts. For teens engaged in the Eye Level City workshops, spaces that had affordable food options, like low-cost food trucks nearby, drew more interest and larger crowds.

By contrast, Open Streets tended to attract a narrower age range and limit opportunities for social mixing. On Canal Street Open Street, for example, 100% of users observed during weekend operating hours from 9 AM to 9 PM were adults, with no children or seniors present. The Open Street offered no alternative programming outside of outdoor seating for restaurants and bars.

Clean spaces paired with friendly faces make for a more welcoming environment.



For all ages, a clean, cared-for space sets a first impression of perceived safety and desirability.

Eye Level City photo data across all participants, spanning the ages of 16 to 78, reinforces this finding: markers of poorly maintained conditions, such as litter, broken sidewalks, pollution, and vandalism, are consistently associated with negative emotions. Teen participants in particular were so put off by a perceived lack of cleanliness in spaces like Seward Park that they turned to nearby spaces like East River Park instead.

Past research shows that failure to maintain a space can compound into bigger civic challenges: poorly maintained spaces have been strongly associated with lower civic pride, trust in neighbors, and trust in local government.¹³



Having people in place to steward spaces — not just clean them — can help set a more welcoming tone.

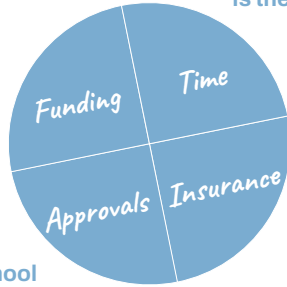
In Poughkeepsie, Scenic Hudson and Hudson River Housing have hired full-time park stewards — not law enforcement or social workers — to serve as friendly, community-facing staff at Pershing Avenue Park and Malcolm X Park. As Director of Urban Conservation Duane Martinez explained, the program helps reduce the power imbalance some residents feel with law enforcement.

While publicly funded workers must remain the primary stewards of public space, grassroots stewardship, like volunteering in gardens or helping at events complements professional staff, fostering ownership, social connection, and well-being.¹⁵ At Lower East Side and Poughkeepsie community gardens, focus group participants reported a mix of professional staff and volunteers has strengthened daily maintenance and the social life of the space.

Operators face bureaucratic roadblocks and coordination challenges.

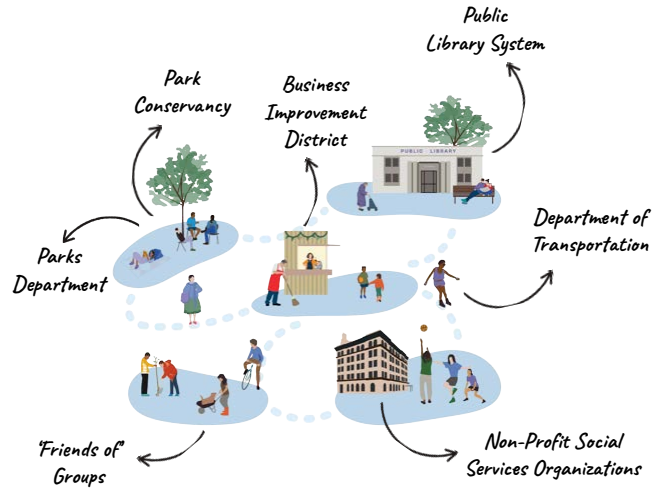
“So many nonprofits competing with each other for grants.”
Poughkeepsie non-profit leader

“Capital projects take a very long time — is there a ‘capital lite’ version?”
NYC DOT interviewee



“We have trouble staffing up our after-school programs because people do not have the right licenses.” Poughkeepsie government interviewee

“For new ideas, we are often finding out requirements in real time.” NYC DOT interviewee



Navigating varied applications for insurance, licenses, and grants consumes operators’ time, labor, and energy.

In Poughkeepsie, youth programming requires city and state licenses that many nonprofits struggle to secure. About 40 separate grants were required to support a single after-school program at the Family Partnership Center, according to Tamer Janakat, Director of Operations. Permitting and insurance also complicate activation, from special Department of Transportation approvals for public art in Hillel Plaza to heavy insurance requirements for Open Streets.

Creation of new sites also moves at a slow pace. A site for future community gathering, the Flatbush African Burial Ground has relied for years on unpaid community labor and short-term support. “We don’t have [spaces] where people can host community events,” says Allyson Martinez, Executive Director of Brooklyn Level Up. “It’s mostly closed and lifeless.”

Fragmented governance makes it difficult to clarify responsibility and secure long-term funding.

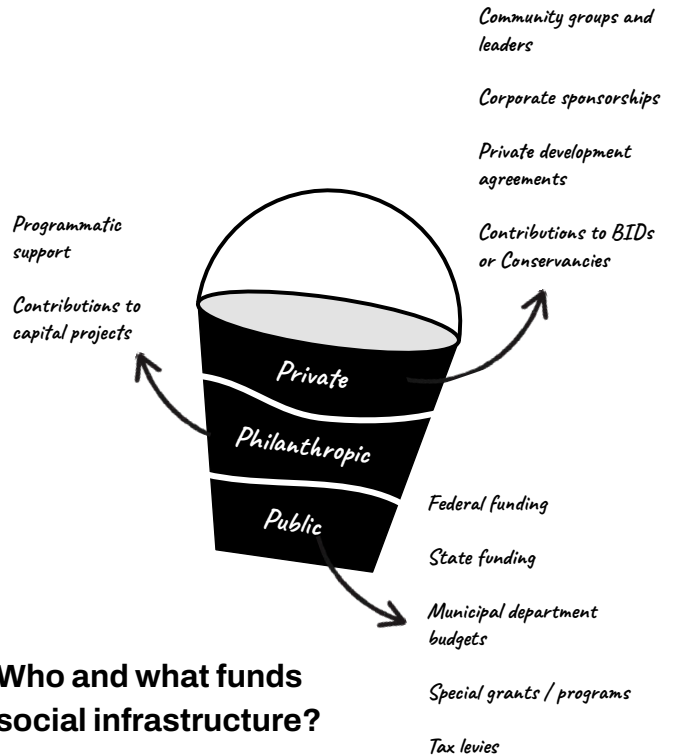
Responsibility for social infrastructure spans multiple agencies and organizations, creating unclear roles and diffused responsibility. In New York City, for example, coordination between Transportation and Parks can be murky — such as at Seward Park and Straus Square, where maintenance and storage require interagency negotiation. Moreover, to fill public funding gaps, nonprofits, conservancies, business improvement districts, and volunteers increasingly support maintenance, programming, and capital improvements — often through under-resourced “invisible labor.”

By contrast, the Educational Alliance in Lower East Side stands out for its hybrid funding model, the scale and mix of spaces it operates, and the diversity of people it serves. With over \$58 million in annual revenue, it runs 15+ multi-use sites serving over 50,000 people annually (ages 0–100), integrating education, wellness, and cultural programming for multi-ethnic, multi-income communities.

Insufficient funding jeopardizes sites now and in the long term.

Government funding for social infrastructure has fallen significantly in recent decades. For example, public funding for parks as a percentage of the total New York City budget has decreased over time, from between 1% and 2% before the 1970s, to roughly 0.5% over the past 30+ years.¹⁶ In Poughkeepsie, the budget for parks is similarly limited. New York City libraries have also had funding pressures, with budget allocations flattening or declining as costs have significantly increased.¹⁷ In 2023, the shortfall was so dire that Sunday library service was suspended for up to 8 months.¹⁸

To compensate for gaps in public funding, nonprofits and informal neighbor networks have emerged to steward sites and corral funds from different sectors. At the smallest scale, community volunteers, parks conservancies, ‘friends of’ groups, and business improvement districts take ownership of day-to-day maintenance, programming, and sometimes capital improvements. While local volunteerism and stewardship is to be applauded, the result of this model, according to interviewees, is a network of “invisible labor” that governments rely on but do not meaningfully fund. At a city scale, groups like the City Parks Foundation in New York City issue grants to nonprofits for programming, volunteer stewardship, and targeted restoration projects. Intermediary organizations like New City Parks also guide local governments in piecing together parks funding — as they did with Malcolm X and Pershing Avenue Parks in Poughkeepsie. While less common, private development may also be leveraged as an opportunity for capital improvements. In Sunset Park and Brooklyn Heights, for example, new public library branches are co-located with housing developments financed through public-private partnerships.



Who and what funds social infrastructure?

This dynamic — unstable public funding and the explosion of a supportive resident volunteer and non-profit ecosystem — creates many challenges. First, governments struggle to deliver on foundational operations, maintenance, and capital improvement needs. Second, individuals and nonprofits who are filling the void are faced with endless, competitive cycles of grant applications that reward organizations with strong staff capacity and fundraising savvy, but places those with fewer resources at a distinct disadvantage. Third, this patchworked funding reality requires high levels of coordination across sectors, agencies, and organizations. Volunteers know their communities well and play an integral role in building trust, engaging neighbors, and designing and managing places, but this piecemeal approach ultimately undermines long-term stability; site operators consistently cited the need for stable funding over one-off, short-term grants — for operations and maintenance, long-term capital improvements, and nonprofit staff.

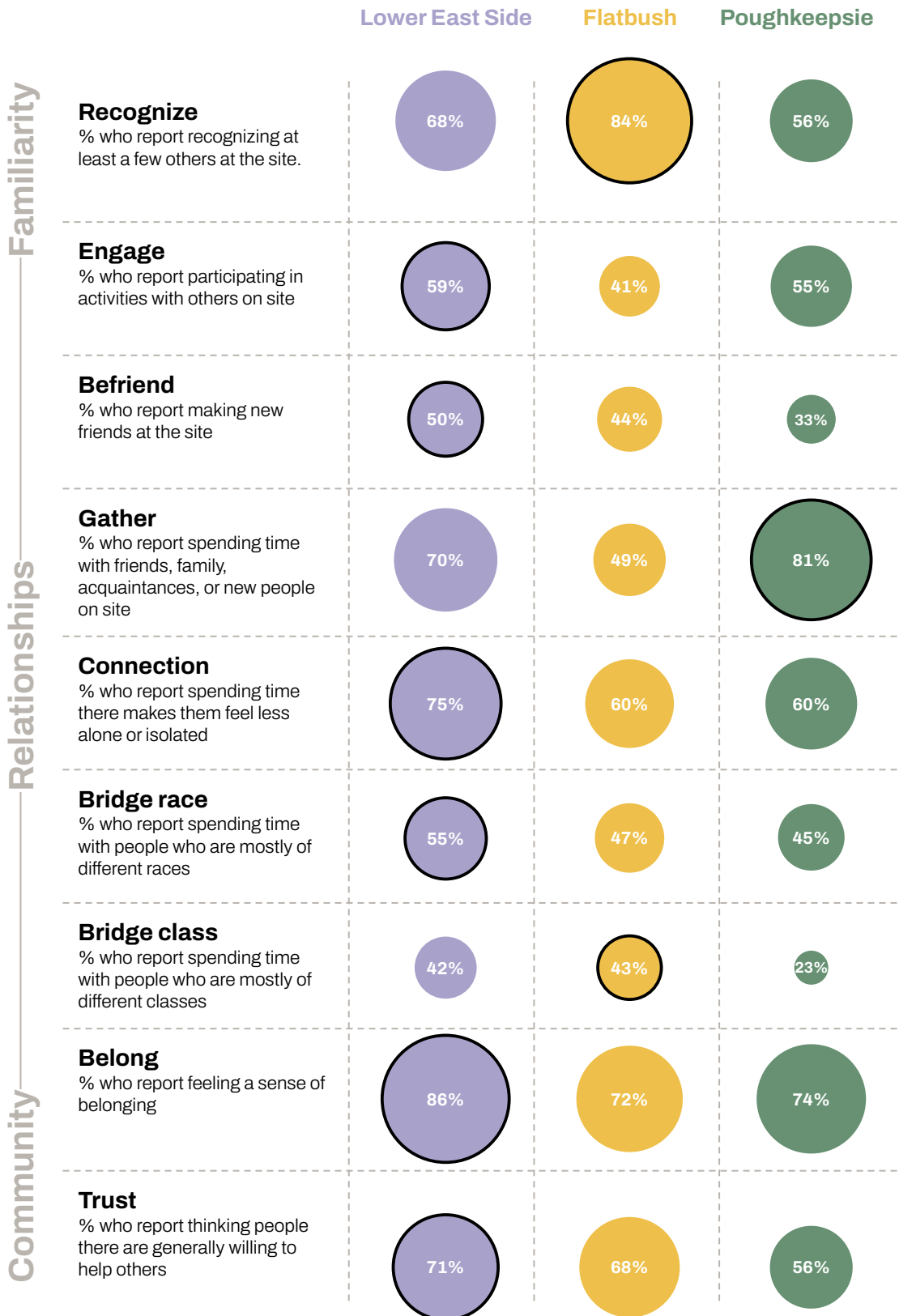
A diverse mix of high-quality, accessible spaces expands opportunities for the social connections that form healthy, resilient societies.



Social infrastructure can facilitate **different types of social connection** — all of which are essential to individual and collective health.



Across study areas, **social infrastructure drives high levels of belonging, trust, and connection.**



Note: Survey data is for outdoor spaces only — In the Lower East Side, samples cover general seating areas in parks, basketball courts, dog parks, tracks and fields, skate parks, tennis and handball courts, soccer fields, and swimming pools. Flatbush samples include sidewalks and plazas. Poughkeepsie samples include parks and walkways.

Rates of social connection reflect the quality and mix in each community's social infrastructure.

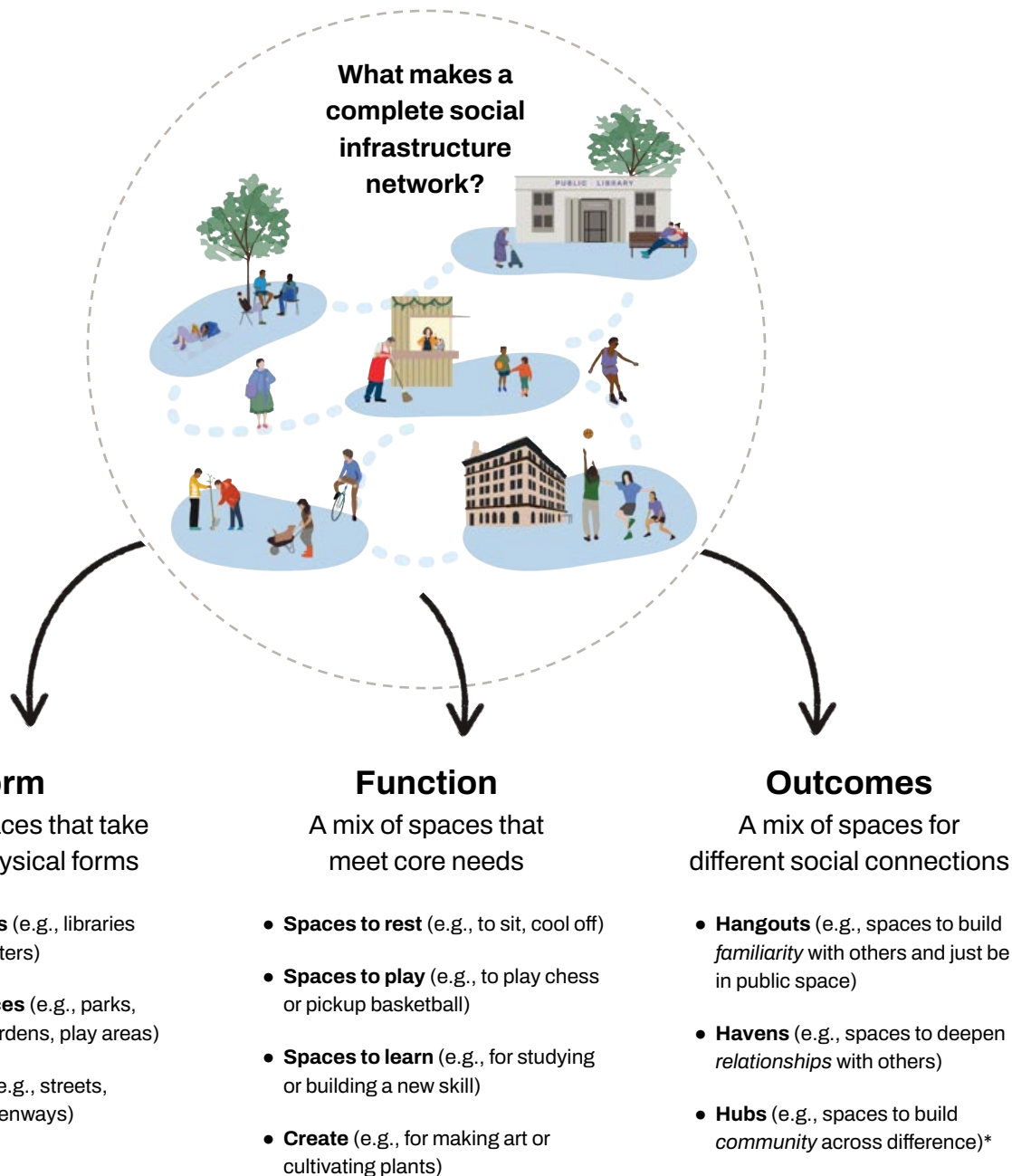
While the three study areas differ in context, all are demographically diverse and economically disadvantaged relative to their city and state, making them broadly relatable to similar communities. Their social connection and social infrastructure vary: the Lower East Side has a strong mix of sites and shows strong social connection of all types. Flatbush and Poughkeepsie each face spatial challenges (e.g., few quality gathering spaces in Flatbush, weak connections between sites in Poughkeepsie), which may influence the types of social connection that are possible in each community.

	Lower East Side	Flatbush	Poughkeepsie
Community Context	<p>Diverse, dense, urban core</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 148,789 people ✓ 1.6 square mile ✓ 66% people of color ✓ \$56,550 median household income – with high poverty rate at 25% ✓ Served by 7 subway lines and 8 bus routes – highly walkable and transit-connected area 	<p>Outer-borough commerce hub</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 153,524 people ✓ 3.3 square mile ✓ 65% people of color ✓ \$82,330 median household income – with high income inequality ✓ Served by 4 subway lines and 14 bus routes but bus service remains inconsistent 	<p>Mid-sized, car-oriented city</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 31,577 people ✓ 5.7 square mile ✓ 61% people of color ✓ \$60,741 median household income – largely working-class with disparities tied to arterials ✓ Mobility constrained by car-centric infrastructure and limited transit
Social Infrastructure	<p>A diverse mix of sites connected by a walkable grid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ High public space assessment score (10 sites) ✓ Many spaces with quality design and programming ✓ Strong connections between sites in proximity ✓ Healthy mix of indoor and outdoor sites in proximity 	<p>A buzzing corridor in need of more spaces for connection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Medium public space assessment score (7 sites) ✓ A busy corridor with few invitations to stay ✓ Limited access to quality indoor and outdoor spaces ✓ Unreliable bus infrastructure 	<p>Revived spaces in need of more everyday activity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Low median public space assessment score (8 sites) ✓ Recent renovation of key indoor and outdoor spaces ✓ Inconsistent programming ✓ High-speed roads discouraging walkability
Social Connection	<p>Many types of connection across the spectrum</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Familiarity: High rates of recognition and engaging in activities with others ✓ Relationships: High rates of befriending and connection ✓ Community: High rates of bridging across race, belonging, and trust 	<p>Casual connection without intentional gathering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Familiarity: High rate of recognition but low rate of engaging in activities with others ✓ Relationships: Low rates of gathering with others they know ✓ Community: High levels of bridging across class, high levels of belonging and trust 	<p>Planned connection with limited informal social mixing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Familiarity: Low rates of recognition but moderate levels of engaging in activities ✓ Relationships: High rates of gathering with others but low rates of befriending new people ✓ Community: Low rates of bridging (race + class) and trust

Data on this page is sourced from the NYU Furman Center's Neighborhood Data Profiles for [Lower East Side/Chinatown MN03](#) and [Flatbush/Midwood BK14](#) and the U.S. Census Bureau's data profile for [Poughkeepsie](#).

A mix of quality, well-connected spaces generates more social outcomes.

Because a single space can rarely meet a neighborhood’s full range of social needs, a healthy mix of quality, complementary public spaces is essential — all connected within a reasonable distance by safe, comfortable streets. A mix of spaces taking different forms, serving different functions, and generating different outcomes is critical to an effective social infrastructure ecosystem.



*Prior Gehl research into best practices in social infrastructure from around the world found that different spaces tended to fall into one or more of these typologies of social outcome.

A diverse mix of sites connected by a walkable grid

The social infrastructure of the Lower East Side includes parks, play areas, community centers, libraries, and more in close proximity to each other. Across these spaces, the Lower East Side survey respondents reported high levels of social life on many measures: 50% made new friends at these sites, 59% participated in activities with others, 71% felt people at the sites are willing to help others, 75% felt the space made them feel less isolated, and 86% felt they belonged.²⁵

The mix of sites clustered within a five-minute walk of Seward Park is one such hub of this social activity. These sites attract an average of 125 visitors per hour throughout the day, with midday activity peaking at more than 400 people, drawing people across age groups and activities.

This cluster works well because of intentional diversity, proximity, and connectivity, as well as because of high residential density and age diversity in the neighborhood. Sites differ in size, typology, openness, and indoor-outdoor conditions, allowing them to serve distinct but complementary roles. Within each, a mix of design features exists to encourage all-day use — from coveted ping pong tables in Seward Park to dance studios in the Manny Cantor Center.

Together, these sites foster a continuous rhythm of activity: Seward Park is most active in the morning, Open Streets in the evening, while the library maintains steady use during operating hours. Each site also attracts different age groups: the library is the most age-diverse, the park skews toward children, adults, and seniors, and Open Streets toward young adults.



People in Seward Park were engaged in the **most diverse mix of activities of all sites.**



81% of photos tagged in Eye Level City in the Lower East Side had positive sentiments.



Network in Focus

Seward Park Area

Form

The Lower East Side has many different indoor and outdoors spaces connected by a walkable grid.

Function

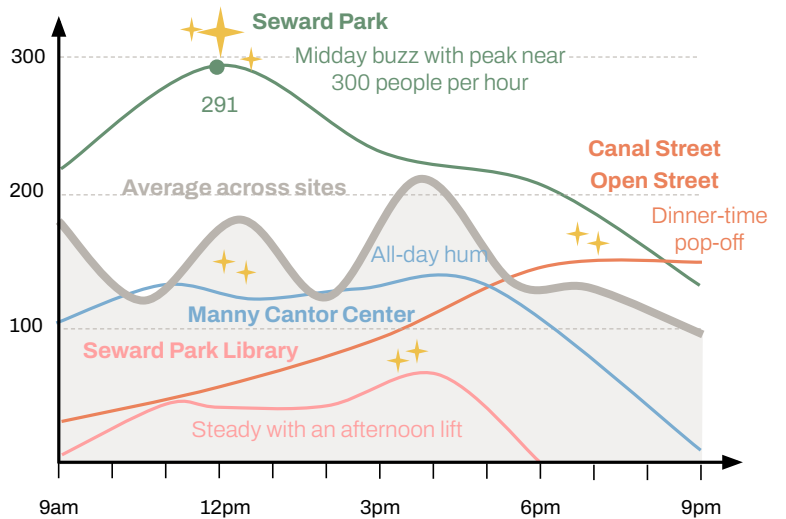
Spaces cater to a mix of activities — from casual chats on a park bench to creative pursuits like ceramics.

Outcomes

Lower East Side spaces see many types of social connection, including deeper bridging and trust.

Public Life Activities

Number of people per hour



Flatbush

A buzzing corridor in need of more spaces for connection

Running for almost two miles through the neighborhood, Flatbush Avenue is a commercial corridor lined with shops where high rates of people walking creates opportunities for spontaneous and planned interactions. On a warm day, the atmosphere is festive, with a cacophony of overlapping music — rap thumping out of car stereos, reggae from restaurants, *corridos* from boomboxes.

Watching the avenue for even an hour, one witnesses countless chance exchanges between local residents. Shop owners post up outside their stores to greet long-time customers, women running errands pause to chat with each other, young men lean out of cars, calling to friends. This pattern shows up in the data: Flatbush had a high rate (84%) of people recognizing others. Flatbush Avenue's street life makes it a site of social infrastructure in its own right.

What Flatbush lacks however, is formal social infrastructure spaces that sustain more prolonged social activity. Indeed, it has far fewer social infrastructure sites per capita than the Lower East Side and Poughkeepsie. Under 50% of Flatbush survey respondents reported engaging in activities with others and gathering with people they knew. In interviews, local stakeholders complained about the dearth of physical spaces to assemble outside of churches, schools, cafes, and restaurants. Prospect Park, despite its proximity, poses physical and psychological barriers to access. As a result, Flatbush Avenue is the place to be, remaining consistently active throughout the day, with 20% of people observed bringing makeshift seating, such as baskets, stools, or lawn chairs. This makeshift social infrastructure demonstrates how collective life persists through improvisation in response to lackluster street design.



84% of people recognized at least a few others at Flatbush sites, the highest of all communities.



20% of people observed brought makeshift seating to Flatbush Ave, filling a gap in available seating.



Network in Focus

Flatbush Avenue

Form

Defined by Flatbush Avenue, with few green / open spaces and indoor gathering spots.

Function

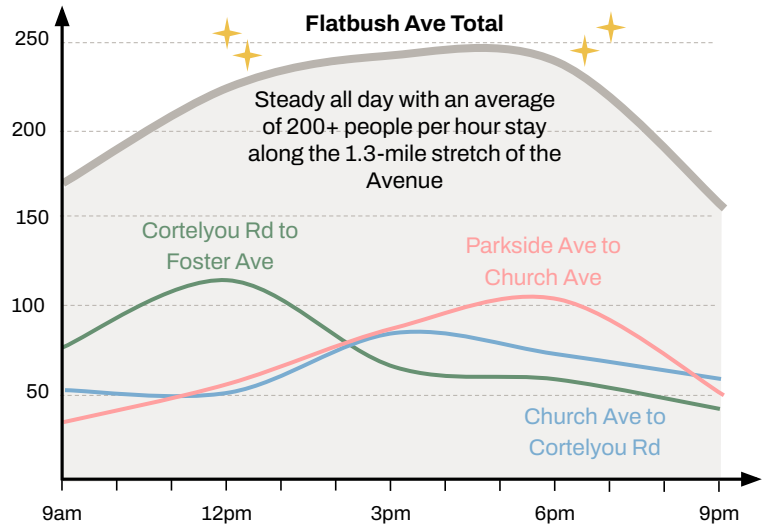
Spaces struggle to meet core needs, so residents bring their own fixings (e.g., dominoes, fold-out chairs).

Outcomes

Flatbush Avenue is a hangout space of familiarity, but the lack of gathering spaces may minimize deep connection.

Public Life Activities

Number of people per hour



Flatbush Avenue

Form: Connector

Function: Primarily to move through, rest

Outcomes: Hangout

Fresh produce market spillouts

Form: Outdoor, market

Function: Primarily to shop, informal chats

Outcomes: Hangout

Flatbush & Cortelyou Public Libraries

Form: Indoor, library

Function: Primarily to learn

Outcomes: Haven, hangout

Bus Stops

Form: Outdoor

Function: Primarily to rest

Outcomes: Hangout

Hillel Plaza

Form: Outdoor, plaza

Function: Primarily to rest

Outcomes: Hangout

Revived spaces in need of more everyday activity

Poughkeepsie has recently seen a range of upgrades to its social infrastructure. Malcolm X Park and Pershing Avenue Park — two neighborhood parks on the North Side — underwent major redesigns, with an infusion of American Rescue Plan Act funding in 2022-2023. Today, they house basketball courts, ample seating, and community garden plots. Pulaski Pool and Pool House reopened in 2024 as a new facility featuring a splash pad, locker rooms, family bathrooms, and updated lighting. The Family Partnership Center — a community center home to about 20 local non-profits — underwent a \$19.1 million renovation in 2022.

These and other public spaces throughout Poughkeepsie are home to programming that brings people together in public space. For example, Community Matters 2, a local non-profit, drew the highest public life activity of all Poughkeepsie sites observed during its summer cookout — 370 people per hour. Indeed, festivals were consistently cited by interviewees as a highlight of Poughkeepsie life — a rare but coveted moment to come together. Everyday socializing in public spaces is less common. Respondents visited outdoor social infrastructure sites a median of 1.5 times a month and 33% reported making new friends there.

Despite quality design and dedicated non-profit stewards, social infrastructure sites have low levels of funding, staffing, and physical connectivity, which hampers everyday use. For example, two wide, high-speed arterial roads bisect Poughkeepsie, cause injuries and fatalities,²⁶ and impede everyday connectivity. Getting from the local high school to the Family Partnership Center for after-school programs, for example, is a risky 25-minute walk that requires crossing both arterials.



20 people were at Malcolm X Park on a Saturday at 9pm, drawn to a new, well-lit basketball court.



81% of people at Poughkeepsie sites spend time with people they know on site.



Network in Focus

North Side in Poughkeepsie

Form

Many different types of spaces, but challenges walking between them due to unsafe arterials and car-centric mobility.

Function

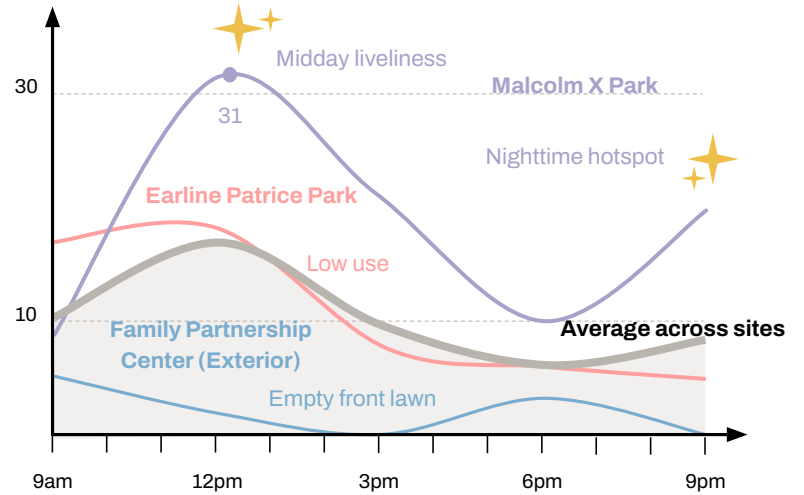
Ample opportunities to rest, learn, play, or create — often through events and programming.

Outcomes

The North Side has many places to hang out and gather with people you already know, but fewer hubs to bridge difference.

Public Life Activities

Number of people per hour



Earline Patrice Park

Form: Outdoor, park

Function: Primarily to rest

Outcomes: Hangout

Pershing Ave Park

15 minute walk

Poughkeepsie High School

25 minute walk

Malcolm X Park

Form: Outdoor, recreation center

Function: Primarily to play, rest

Outcomes: Haven, hangout

Family Partnership Center

Form: Indoor, recreation center

Function: Primarily to learn, play, create

Outcomes: Haven, hangout

Community Matters 2

Form: Indoor & outdoor, community organization

Function: Primarily to learn, play, create

Outcomes: Hub

Recommendations

Reinvesting in social
infrastructure at the city
scale and human scale

We have invested in social infrastructure at scale before, through efforts in the early 20th century.



Image source: NYC Parks

Colonial Park Pool, opened in 1936



Image source: NYPL

Seward Park Library, opened in 1909



Image source: The Kermit Project

Riverside Park, 1925



Image source: Samuel Gottscho, Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Betsy Head Recreation Center, 1939

851 sites were created and improved through the New Deal in NYC.²⁹

67 library branches in NYC were funded and opened through the Carnegie Agreement between 1899 and 1923.³⁰



Image source: Alexander Severin

Shirley Chisholm Recreation Center, opened in 2026



Image source: Michael Moran

Greenpoint Library and Environmental Education Center, opened in 2020

Today, we are seeing signs of progress. The time is now to match the level of ambition seen a century ago.



Sunset Park Library, reopened in 2023

According to a recent *New York Times* survey, the public ranks parks and libraries as a number one priority. Yet the two agencies always face the biggest cuts when it comes to balancing the annual city budget.³¹



Image source: Jeff Goldbergs

Far Rockaway Library, reopened in 2024

Reinvesting in social infrastructure at the **city scale** and **human scale**.

Our recommendations are based on the main finding of our research: social infrastructure is essential infrastructure. We need to invest in it. We need to design it well. We need to program it. We need to maintain it. If we do this, the returns to our neighborhoods and communities will be significant and meaningful. If we don't, the joyful, affordable city will be out of reach for most of us, and the problems of inequality and polarization will grow more dire.

About a century ago, from the Progressive Era through the New Deal, Americans faced dangers similar to those of today. At a moment of rising unrest and conflict, the United States built a vast supply of social infrastructure, opening public schools, public libraries, public parks, public swimming pools, and public housing complexes where ordinary people could gather, lifting themselves — and each other — up. The hard-won projects were the government's response to social movements demanding changes to the structure of the nation's economy and society. Ordinary Americans, immigrant and native-born, were not only poor and hungry; they were fed up with hazardous working conditions, crowded housing, and political corruption, and incensed by a Gilded Age overclass whose accumulation of wealth came directly at their expense.

The dramatic improvement in working and living conditions across the United States changed the course of American history, helping stave off the threat of fascism and propelling the nation towards its apex of power and prosperity. The material gains from these great projects extended beyond household finances and into the social fabric of our towns and cities. They complemented new housing construction by creating spaces not merely to reside, but to live a good life. Instead of confining themselves to factories, tenements, and the mean streets of the metropolis, working people won access to beautiful new places made for playing, learning, and associating freely. Places that recognized and dignified them. Places that told them they belonged.

This is not the 1930s. There is no New Deal, nor anything suggesting that the federal government is poised to make a massive investment in social infrastructure any time soon. But things change fast in American politics and culture, and New York can begin building better gathering places right now.

The work has already begun in places, with recent projects in New York City, from libraries co-located with affordable housing, to gleaming new recreation centers and upgraded swimming pools.

Additionally, civic leaders and volunteers have stepped in to organize and program social infrastructure, like Paseo Park. Nonprofits fill programming gaps with pop-up, moveable activities and furniture. In his first 100 days the mayor of New York has already developed public-private funding approaches to invest in new initiatives like universal childcare, and is poised to create more.

Here are six recommendations for how to invest in upstream democracy, amplify existing efforts, and make the more joyful, affordable city possible.

Recommendations:

- 1 Supercharge the library
- 2 Revamp recreation and play spaces for all ages
- 3 Make our gathering spaces comfortable and resilient for extreme weather
- 4 Transform streets into safe, social neighborhood connectors
- 5 Hire and partner with communities to run and activate public spaces
- 6 Assess neighborhood social infrastructure needs and fill gaps



1

Supercharge the library

In places like New York City, libraries benefit from an expansive footprint of over 200 branches — each of which offers services and spaces for residents despite lackluster resources. Raising the bar for library quality will require dramatic expansions in hours, staffing, and programming to better serve local residents.

Baseline physical improvements might include upgraded bathrooms, improved HVAC systems for warming and cooling, and mesh network Wi-Fi. Additional improvements may include more bookable meeting rooms,

expanded seating areas, outdoor plazas or terraces attached to branches, shared and specialized services (e.g., equipment rentals like sewing machines, recording studios), and co-location with other amenities like recreation centers or community gardens or investments, such as affordable housing. Together, these improvements can help libraries amplify their role as critical hubs for everyday resources, essential knowledge, and community connection.



A redeveloped Sunset Park Library opened in 2023, paired with 49 units of 100% affordable housing built above the space.



Revamp recreation and play spaces for all ages

Areas to play and stay active are the fulcrum of community life. New York City must design and build a new generation of safe, adventurous, enriching recreational spaces for all ages — from kids climbing playgrounds, to teens playing pick-up basketball, to seniors practicing tai chi. For example, more public indoor and outdoor swimming pools, comparable to Robert Moses’ bold additions in the 1930s, could help residents cool off in the summer and serve the many young people who lack swimming know-how. New York City’s network of skate parks, a vital source of solidarity and support among young people, could be built out significantly.

Indoor recreation centers — long overdue for modernization and an expanded footprint — can house dedicated spaces for athletics, the arts, and informal socializing. They can also relieve residents of costly gym or ceramics studio memberships. All of these spaces could be operated through the public sector, and/or through partnerships with established organizations like the Educational Alliance, which has a successful track record operating community centers, and informal civic and neighborhood groups.



Educational Alliance’s Manny Cantor Center reopened in 2014 after a \$55 million gut renovation of its flagship building. The multi-purpose community center offers programs, essential services, and exciting events for people of all ages and backgrounds on the Lower East Side.



Make our gathering spaces comfortable and resilient for extreme weather

As the weather changes, the ability to comfortably gather in public spaces is not a guarantee. Warming and cooling centers have historically been an emergency response effort to keep people safe from heat stroke, dehydration, and hypothermia. As extreme temperatures become more common, however, public gathering spaces must be built to keep people safe and comfortable on an everyday basis — transforming climate comfort from a crisis management effort to an essential part of city infrastructure.

Indoor public spaces like libraries and community centers can provide an air-conditioned alternative to the home and reduce households' high summertime electricity bills.

Communities lacking tree cover will need more sources of shade — both high-stem canopy trees and human-made shade structures — to cool corridors and gathering spaces. Planting native vegetation throughout gathering places and streets will contribute to cooler ambient temperatures, improve biodiversity and absorb stormwater. Additionally, water fountains and misters can double as both a refreshing and playful feature in the public realm — and keep residents from improvising by illegally opening fire hydrants. Together, these efforts can amplify and sustain resiliency action by city and state governments.



Beyond being a place for play and relaxation, Malcolm X Park in Poughkeepsie is designed to help alleviate future impacts of the climate crisis. Rain gardens and bioswales built to mitigate flood events and improve water quality in the Fall Kill are planted with native shrubs and perennials that provide essential habitat to boost creekside biodiversity.



Transform streets into safe, social neighborhood connectors

Given that social infrastructure is only useful if it can be accessed, paths leading to social infrastructure sites need to be safe, convenient, and delightful. Equipping streets to fulfill their potential as connectors to social infrastructure — and a form of social infrastructure in their own right — will take more than incremental sidewalk improvements, signage, or occasional closures for farmers’ markets and open streets. It will take significant changes to plantings, furnishings, and design to re-center the street as a comfortable, social place that’s built for people all year-round.

This means more seating for people to take a rest by the bus stop or between errands. Improved lighting in the streetscape — at a human-scale height and wattage — will make it feel safer

for all people to move through these spaces after dark. Repurposing the curb space or parking lane for community uses or greenery — not just outdoor dining — will expand opportunities for more everyday, non-commercial gathering. Activating the streetscape and ground floor at the edges of indoor social infrastructure — whether book fairs by libraries, play plazas by schools, or dance classes by community centers — is a way to strengthen their visibility and vibrancy.

All of these improvements should be focused on key routes and corridors that connect social infrastructure sites with residential areas, transit, schools, and job centers. They can also be tied to other initiatives, such as school streets or low-emission zones.



After decades of community advocacy and speculative design proposals, the New York City Department of Transportation is planning to improve the pedestrian crossing from Grand Army Plaza into Prospect Park by eliminating the southern section of the road encircling the plaza. “Grand Army Plaza is the gateway to Brooklyn’s backyard, Prospect Park — and it should welcome New Yorkers with a street design that puts safety first,” Mayor Zohran Mamdani said in an April 2026 statement.³²



Hire and partner with communities to run and activate spaces

Social infrastructure requires dedicated staffing to run programming, maintain spaces, and welcome people in. While volunteerism and informal stewardship is an asset for any neighborhood, sustainable operations rely on paid staff with wages comparable to private-sector opportunities. These can ensure spaces are open year round, and especially during summer months when public programming for children is in highest demand. This could occur through an expansion of the New York Summer Youth Employment Program. Other workforce development opportunities may include more funding to staff up organizations like HortNYC that maintain green spaces, hiring of social cohesion ambassadors in green spaces (as is happening in two Poughkeepsie parks), or

career-building opportunities in pathways tied to social infrastructure sites, such as recreation or library sciences.

Beyond workforce development, local volunteers may also need additional resources — whether funding for programming or stipends for some participants — for informal events.

In order to increase headcount and job opportunities, reducing administrative friction is a priority. This means simplifying permitting, licensing, and compliance processes for operations and programming, and providing shared services and/or technical assistance to help organizations and volunteers navigate remaining requirements.



New City Parks, a nonprofit launched in 2020 by former NY State Parks Commissioner Rose Harvey, helps smaller cities and their underserved communities to create and maintain parks. It provides funding and support while working with local leaders to develop practical, long-term park management plans with clear goals, maintenance strategies, and implementation steps.



Assess neighborhood social infrastructure needs and fill gaps

Every neighborhood in New York has assets to amplify and gaps to fill in their local social infrastructure networks. A social infrastructure inventory or ‘health check’ done with community partnerships and at the neighborhood scale can help city departments and local partners prioritize and coordinate investment. Understanding where the gaps are — as this study has done in its focus communities — is an important first step.

First, public sector, in partnership with local leaders and organizations, should map all public social infrastructure assets (e.g., parks, libraries, recreation centers) and their informal and formal stewards (e.g., city departments, conservancies, non-profits, volunteers) in a neighborhood and assess the

diversity, quality, and accessibility of these spaces. Then, the gaps should be filled accordingly, which may include: targeting capital improvements where quality is lacking; creating new sites in underserved areas; expanding budgets for programming or maintenance; and tying new social infrastructure investments to incoming development in the area. Community partners should be involved from the beginning and can help determine local needs and best ways to meet them. The assessment framework at the end of this report can serve as a guide.

To draw on two examples, in Flatbush, Brooklyn, residents, while having a significant number of churches and a thriving set of community-involved non-profits, regularly cite a dire absence of places for young people to

safely congregate, seating for those gathering on Flatbush Avenue, and shaded spaces during especially hot days. Conversely, upstate, in Poughkeepsie, locals have different needs, noting that, despite an abundance of program-ready physical space, they suffer from a consistent lack of funding for programs, safe pathways between social infrastructural sites, and transportation to more distant locations. The needs of these two communities, informed by local leadership and network-wide analysis, point the way toward priority investments to improve neighborhood social infrastructure networks.

Raising the bar by raising funds from multiple sectors for social infrastructure

Social infrastructure depends on capital funding for new and improved sites and sustained funding for the everyday maintenance, programming, and stewards and staff that make spaces work. However, public funding for these systems has declined over time, even as demand and public support remain high. As cities across the country reckon with crises of affordability, isolation, and civic decline, they are also exploring new models for funding social infrastructure.

In New York, government leaders can build on recent creative public-private funding models — such as to create affordable housing, libraries, and community or educational spaces together — as well as on commitments to fund everyday systems, such as bus service, childcare, and grocery stores under New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, with support from New York Governor Kathy Hochul.²⁷ Indeed, just as commuting, eating, and child-rearing are essential to everyday life, so is social infrastructure. Incidentally, social infrastructure sites are often home to many of these very activities.

Amid a widening budget deficit in New York City, increasing public funding for social infrastructure will continue to require more than changes to department budgets on an annual basis, as advocates have been pushing for for years with parks and libraries.

New mechanisms may include the creation of public-private partnerships that support endowed programs, paired with new capital investments, revenue generation from new sources, like curbside parking, tax levies, or funding ballot measures that have gained ground in many U.S. and global cities.

Recent commitments from three major foundations to the Mayor’s Fund to Advance New York City, to support the Mayor’s free childcare initiative, demonstrate the vital role philanthropy and the private sector can have in funding specific programs.²⁸ Moving forward, these could be tailored to social infrastructure investments and operations — such as capital upgrades, or community ambassador programs that assist in planning, activating, and stewarding places.

Today, the “open space ratio” is used as a zoning standard to determine whether and how much open space real estate developers should provide at or near new residential buildings. A “social infrastructure ratio” could be a similar measure to inform developers’ contributions to on-site or nearby social infrastructure sites.

Institutional investors could contribute to a dedicated fund that harnesses social infrastructure’s varied returns on investment — such as property value, health, and climate resilience. Such a fund could be tied to a specific area (as with a Business Improvement District)

or sit in a citywide pool distributed equitably based on greatest need.

While social infrastructure needs more fiscally secure, less politically volatile funding than municipal budgets typically provide, the public sector must nevertheless set the foundation and direction. Guiding principles for funding could be:

- **Public funding** provides the foundation and direction for departmental allocations and new revenue-generating policies
- **Philanthropic and impact investors** support targeted investments, innovation, and expansion
- **Real estate developers and institutional investors** contribute through place-based investments that meet neighborhood needs and support development projects
- **Community leaders and stewards** can help raise funds in formal and informal ways and be involved as decision-makers in how sites are designed, programmed, and activated

We live in unprecedented times and to fund these important spaces, we’ll need an all-hands-on-deck approach that both builds trust and empowers communities and establishes public and private partnerships that capture the full value of social infrastructure.

Acknowledgements



The Institute for Public Knowledge (IPK) brings theoretically serious scholarship to bear on major public issues. Located at New York University, it nurtures collaboration among social researchers in New York and around the world. It builds bridges between university-based researchers and organizations pursuing practical action. It supports communication between researchers and broader publics. And it examines transformations in the public sphere, social science, and the university as a social institution as these change the conditions for public knowledge.

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Gehl is a global urban design and strategy consultancy that shapes places where people and planet can thrive. We believe that by applying a people-first approach to planning, design, and research, we are able to solve some of our communities' most pressing challenges. Founded in Copenhagen and active globally—with studios in New York and San Francisco—Gehl has worked in over 250 cities across six continents.

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9th Street A-1 Block Association
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Educational Alliance
Eldridge St Block Association
Henry Street Settlement
Manny Cantor Center
New York Public Library
University Settlement

Flatbush

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Flatbush Nostrand Junction BID

Poughkeepsie

Casa Comunitaria de Recursos
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Community Matters 2
Day One Early Learning Community
Dutchess County Pride Center
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MASS Design
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Appendix

Notes on Methodology

Methods Snapshot

Public Life Observation

3,080 people observed

Stationary visitor activities — including perceived age and gender, posture, group setting, and activity — were recorded anonymously using the Gehl Public Life App to understand who is present at social infrastructure sites and how they spend time there.

Survey

1,100+ individuals surveyed

A 23-question survey was administered to visitors of 21 social infrastructure sites to examine the types and depth of social connections formed at each site.

Interviews

98 interviewees

Interviews with residents, site operators, and community leaders were conducted to understand the level of social connection, operating model, the quality and needs of social infrastructure sites.

Public Space Assessment

28 sites

Spatial quality indicators related to the site's design, programming, and maintenance were assessed to understand the physical conditions of social infrastructure sites.



Focus Groups

3 focus groups

Focus groups with 2-6 residents were conducted in each study location to understand how key stakeholder groups experience and perceive social infrastructure within their communities.

Mapping

12 space types

Distinct social infrastructure space types, ranging from parks and playgrounds to streets and plazas, were mapped based on publicly available datasets and on-site research.

Eye Level City

3 workshops

Groups of 5-14 residents participated in photo-journaling walks, followed by post-walk workshops, to share their lived experiences and perceptions of local social infrastructure sites.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 98 residents and community leaders in Flatbush, the Lower East Side, and Poughkeepsie. Individuals were selected according to several logics, but with a bias towards those who were or had been engaged in some form of community development or planning -- whose work, in effect, required them to think about the challenge of local social infrastructure. Such stakeholders were identified through public sources, such as media reports or directories, or, in many cases, through snowball sampling, wherein one interviewee would recommend another who they expected would have something apropos to contribute to the study. In other instances, the opinions of unspecialized residents were solicited as a means of understanding the state of a community's social infrastructure from the perspective of those who would putatively use it. In this sense, we sought the perspectives of both "experts" and non-experts, seeing where they overlapped and diverged. Our goal in these interviews was to both offer data that differed from that gathered through quantitative research and secondary source analysis, while also seeking to verify those findings.

Survey

Surveys were conducted with over 1,100 patrons in the Lower East Side, Flatbush, and Poughkeepsie during July-November 2025. The types of public social infrastructure included in the study were parks, sports facilities, libraries, community centers, skate parks, track-and-field facilities, and dog parks. The survey sampling framework was developed using multiple sources of information, including field observations, SafeGraph data, administrative records, and our team's local knowledge. All surveys were administered using paper questionnaires. Surveyors typically administered the survey, unless patrons requested to complete it themselves. Each survey took approximately three minutes to complete. In general seating areas within parks, we employed random sampling. Surveyors used the last digit of the second at the moment of selection and counted from right to left to identify the patron to approach. In sports facilities and other sub-facility spaces within parks, surveyors approached individuals who were not actively engaged in activities in order to minimize disruption. Across all three sites, only adults aged 18 and older were surveyed. The design of the survey is grounded in theories of social connectedness in public spaces and aims to examine these processes using empirical data.

In-person Observations

In-person observations, with notes, were carried out at 76 field sites in Flatbush, the Lower East Side, and Poughkeepsie. Our selection of these sites was guided both by interviews and secondary sources, particularly media reports, in which we sought to answer the question of which social infrastructural sites were most important to community members. We also relied heavily on SafeGraph data, which leverage geolocation data from cell phones to rank which areas of a community were most heavily trafficked. In addition, we sought, for all three communities, to comprehensively canvas their geographic areas, either by walking, in the case of the Lower East Side or Flatbush, or by driving, in the Poughkeepsie. This enabled us to verify, through direct observation, findings from other sources, as well as discover new sites. This in-person exploration allowed us to identify which infrastructure, in practice, the community did or did not use. In Flatbush, for example, while Flatbush Avenue is not generally described, in public sources, as a form of social infrastructure or community engagement, direct observation allowed us to identify it as a key node of social connection.

Public Life Observations

Visitor stationary activities were observed and recorded anonymously by 23 trained volunteers (including IPK staff and Gehl staff) using the Gehl Public Life App. Stationary counts recorded visitors' locations, perceived age, gender, posture, group setting, and activities.

Data collection took place at key social infrastructure sites within each study area.

Lower East Side:
Seward Park, Seward Park Library, Canal Street (Open Street), Jefferson Street (Open Street)

Flatbush:
Flatbush Avenue along three key stretches Parkside Avenue, Church Ave, Cortelyou Road, and Foster Avenue as the dividing lines

Poughkeepsie:
Malcolm X Park, Mansion Square Park, Family Partnership Center, Community Matters 2

Public Space Assessment

Gehl staff conducted an assessment of the physical quality indicators related to the site's design, programming, and maintenance using a digital form in Maptionnaire. Each indicator was rated on a three-point scale: poor, average, or good.

Data collection took place at key social infrastructure sites within each study area.

Lower East Side: Seward Park, Seward Park Library, Canal Street (Open Street), Jefferson Street (Open Street), Captain Jacob Joseph Playground, Sol Lain Playground, Luther Guilick Playground, 14th Street Y, La Plaza Cultural

Flatbush:
Flatbush Avenue, Flatbush Library, Caribbean Marketplace, Cortelyou Library, Tot Lot, Newkirk Plaza, Parade Ground

Poughkeepsie:
Malcolm X Park, Mansion Square Park, Family Partnership Center, Community Matters 2, Pershing Ave Park, Waryas Park

Eye Level City

Groups of 5-16 trained participants (ages 16-78) from Henry Street Settlement's Summer Youth program, Manny Cantor Center and Brooklyn Level Up took part in a photovoice walk exercise using the Gehl Eye Level City App. During a 60-minute walk through the Lower East Side, participants were asked to photograph places that either encouraged or discouraged social interaction within the community.

For each photo, the app prompted them to:

- Rate the photo on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being negative and 5 being positive.
- Tag the emotion the photo evoked, choosing from a range of feelings – from positive emotions such as happy, comfortable, and connected, to negative ones like stressed, unsafe, or isolated.
- Identify what triggered that feeling, selecting from categories such as design elements (e.g., art, architecture), programming (e.g., events), or maintenance (e.g., cleanliness).

One week after the walk, a co-analysis focus group was conducted to further explore and contextualize the participants' perspectives on these social infrastructure sites.

Study Sites

Working closely with local partners and community leaders, the team examined 35 sites across three communities — the Lower East Side, Flatbush, and Poughkeepsie, with a focus on Downtown and the North Side, using a mixed-methods approach.

Drawing on a review of existing social infrastructure indicators, the study developed an assessment framework to evaluate how design, programming, maintenance, and funding shape social connection. By combining multimethod research designed by IPK’s sociologists and Gehl’s urban planners — including quantitative analysis with field research and observation — the research documents patterns and on-the-ground realities related to how people use social infrastructure and how the quality of social infrastructure impacts a range of social connection outcomes.

Lower East Side

Canal Street (Open Street)
East River Park
Hamilton Fish Park
Jefferson Street (Open Street)
Junior High 56 school yard
La Plaza Cultural Community Garden
LES Coleman Skatepark
Luther Gulick Park
Manny Cantor Center
Ottendorfer Library
Pier 35
Pier 42
Sara D Roosevelt Park
Seward Park
Seward Park Library
The 14th Street Y
Tompkins Square Library
Tompkins Square Park

Flatbush

Caribbean Marketplace
Cortelyou Library
Flatbush Avenue
Flatbush Library
Newkirk Plaza
Parade Ground
The Junction
Tot Lot

Poughkeepsie

Adriance Memorial Library
College Hill Park
Eastman Park
Family Partnership Center
Kaal Rock Park
Main Street
Malcolm X Park
Mansion Square Park
Pershing Ave Park
Pulaski Park
Walkway over the Hudson
Waryas Park

Assessment Framework

Design and measure for social outcomes

A guide for site operators

Drawing from existing literature and the findings from this study, the enclosed framework functions as an assessment guide for site operators. The framework is organized around the different design, program, maintenance, and funding factors that contribute to a site facilitating the full spectrum of social connection — from familiarity to relationships to community.



Social Infrastructure Assessment Framework

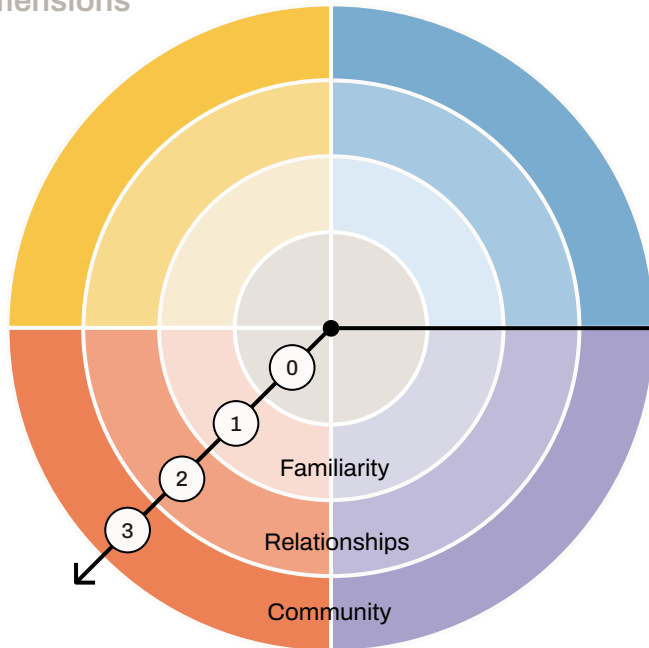
Social infrastructure refers to the network of physical spaces that shape our capacity to interact. But what does it take to bring interactions to life?

The way a site is designed, programmed, funded, and maintained influences the depth of social connection that can take place there. For example, weekly art classes at your local community center might make it easier to meet new neighbors, or good lighting in your neighborhood park might make it easier to hang out there with your friends at night.

This framework is a tool for understanding these connections between operations and outcomes. It codifies different approaches to design, program, funding, and maintenance associated with different levels of interaction: from familiarity, to relationships, to community. We use the example of a library to illustrate what each criteria may look like in practice.

→ **How does your site fare?** Refer to the signals on the back page to understand how to measure the quality of social infrastructure and its impact on outcomes.

Dimensions



level of social connection *

- 0 People cannot connect socially.
- 1 **Familiarity:** People are sharing space and coexisting.
- 2 **Relationships:** People are interacting and getting to know others.
- 3 **Community:** People are deepening ties to feel bound to the collective.

* Cuts across dimensions of design, program, funding, and maintenance

Design

Criteria	Example
1 The space is designed for public access.	I can easily get into the library from the outside at a time that is convenient for me.
2 The space is comfortable, welcoming, and flexible to people's needs.	I can comfortably stay a while thanks to the mix of cozy, quiet spaces and informal gathering spaces.
3 The space reflects community identities, history, and culture.	The artwork on the walls is reflective of my community — so much that my neighbor's artwork made it on to the community wall.

Program

Criteria	Example
1 The space offers free and consistent programs and services with broad appeal.	I can check out a book.
2 The space offers group-based programs and services that are responsive to community needs and interests.	I can attend a book club.
3 The space enables community members to create and sustain their own initiatives.	I can propose and host a Spanish language book club for my community.

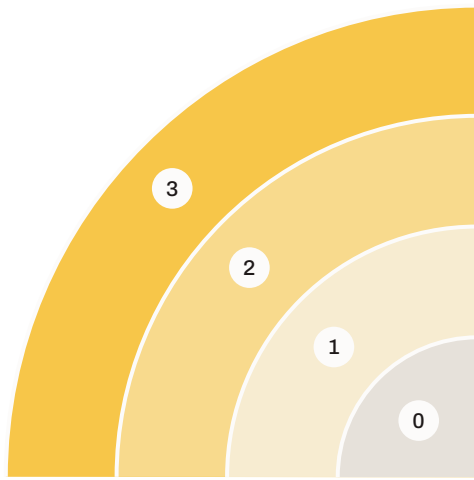
Maintenance

Criteria	Example
1 The space is clean and well-maintained by dedicated staff.	The library staff is welcoming and keeps the place clean.
2 Dedicated staff actively respond to community needs through regular monitoring.	The library staff recommends books and upcoming events based on my interests.
3 Visitors feel a sense of responsibility to take care of the place.	I volunteer my time teaching digital literacy skills in the computer lab.

Funding

Criteria	Example
1 The space is consistently and sufficiently funded.	The library has consistent funding that is not vulnerable to local budget cuts.
2 Budget expands as needed based on demonstrated community needs.	Library systems assess each site's budget needs quarterly, adjusting allocations based on operational needs.
3 Budget priorities are determined by community members.	Library systems consult a community advisory committee when setting budget.

Design



Definition

Refers to the location and physical design of the space, including layout, accessibility, lighting, and furnishing, all of which shape how welcoming, usable, and conducive the environment is to fostering social connection.

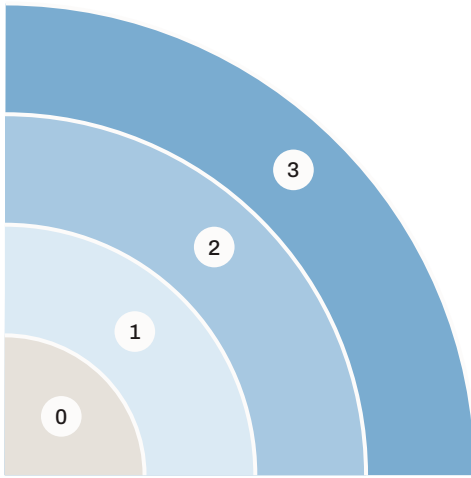


Key Assessment Methods

- Public Space Assessment
- Survey
- Site / Operator Interview
- Public Life Observation
- Focus Group
- Photo Journaling
- Desktop Research

Level of connection	Signal	Description	Method
0 Baseline Criteria The space is NOT designed for public access.	Presence of defensive architecture ¹	Design that intentionally restricts or discourages certain behaviors in public spaces, particularly those seen as undesirable	● ● ●
	Presence of barriers	Such as fences or road infrastructure that challenge site access	● ●
	Severely restricted open hours	Open hours challenge easy and convenient site access, especially on weekday evenings and weekends	● ●
	Microclimate challenges	Lack of protection from the sun, wind, or other elements	●
1 Familiarity The space is designed for public access.	Visibility	Presence of transparent facades and clear sightlines	●
	Legibility	Legible signage that clearly indicates public access and hours of operation	●
	Ample open hours	# of hours open per week, especially evenings & weekends	●
	Ease of access & movement	Clear entrances and ease of movement for people with disabilities, elders, and families with children, etc.	● ●
	Physical accessibility	% of visitors within a 10–15 minute walk or transit ride	●
2 Relationships The space is comfortable, welcoming, and flexible to people's needs.	Social accessibility	Share of respondents who say they feel safe, welcome, & respected at the site	● ● ●
	Flexible seating	Ample comfortable and movable seating options that allow for a variety of social and solitary arrangements	●
	Nature	Design that enables interaction with nature	●
	Mix of scales	Presence of sub-areas of different sizes for flexible use	●
3 Community The space reflects community identities, history, and culture.	Cultural / artistic elements	Visible reflections of local culture and identity in physical design of the space, such as art, furniture, and decor	● ●
	Feeling of representation	Share of respondents who feel the site reflects their community and is “for them”	● ● ●
	Participatory design	Number or proportion of displays or spaces designed, or curated by patrons (e.g., community art walls, zine racks, themed book displays, DIY repair cafes, etc.)	● ● ●

Program



Definition

Refers to organized activities, events, or services that educate, engage, and bring people together in a shared space.

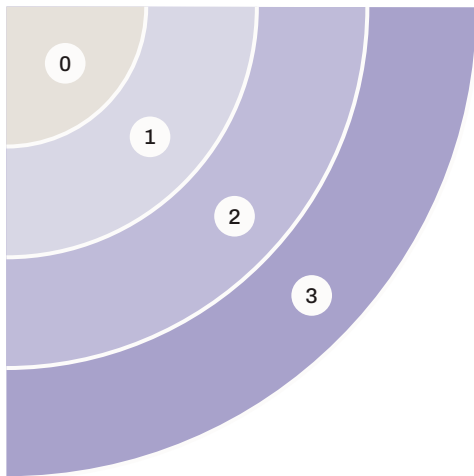
Key Assessment Methods

- Public Space Assessment
- Survey
- Site / Operator Interview
- Public Life Observation
- Focus Group
- Photo Journaling
- Desktop Research



Level of connection	Signal	Description	Method
0 Baseline Criteria The space is NOT freely and consistently programmed.	Barriers to participation	Ticketed or pay-to-play programming	● ● ●
	Time-bound or one-off programming	Limited availability or frequency of programming	● ●
1 Familiarity The space offers free and consistent programs and services with broad appeal.	Inclusivity	Share of free / low-cost programming	●
	Program regularity	Average number of hours of weekly programming	●
	Visitorship	Average hourly visitorship; % of respondents who say they visit the sites at least weekly; % of site visitors who say they spend at least 30 mins at the site when they visit	●
2 Relationships The space offers programs and services that are group-based and responsive to community needs and interests.	Group programs	% of program offering that is group-based	●
	Opportunity for meeting new people	% of site visitors making new acquaintances	●
3 Community The space enables community members to create and sustain their own initiatives.	User impact	% of users who report the site helped them achieve a goal (e.g. finding a job, gaining skills, connecting with others)	●
	Participatory programming	# or % of programs that are co-developed with community members, organizations, or patrons	● ● ●
	Voluntary contributions to stewardship	Presence of opportunities to volunteer and number of volunteers or community members contributing time, materials, or ideas	● ● ●

Funding



Definition

Refers to financial resources—primarily from local, state, and federal governments, supplemented by grants and donations—that support operations, staffing, programs, and facilities, ensuring sustained access and services over time.

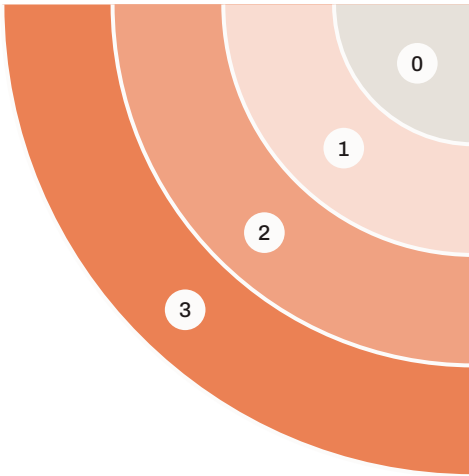


Key Assessment Methods

- Public Space Assessment
- Survey
- Site / Operator Interview
- Public Life Observation
- Focus Group
- Photo Journaling
- Desktop Research

Level of connection	Signal	Description	Method
0 Baseline Criteria The space is inconsistently and insufficiently funded.	Staffing shortage		● ●
	Restricted hours of operation		● ●
1 Familiarity The space is consistently and sufficiently funded.	Adequate resourcing	The site receives an adequate allocation of public funding	● ● ●
	Program longevity	% of programs that have been operating for more than one year or budget cycle	● ●
	Continuity	The site has not had to scale back programming, staff, open hours, etc. in response to resource cuts	● ●
	Predictability	Community members are informed about the budget updates and decisions that impact them	● ●
2 Relationships The budget for the space can expand as needed based on demonstrated need.	Fundraising capacity	Evidence of successful fundraising initiatives	● ●
	Program / service expansion	Instance of successful program or service budgets changes based on demonstrated community need	● ● ●
	Community consultation	Community members are consulted about budget decisions	● ●
3 Community Budget priorities are determined by community members.	Community decision-making	Community members are involved in prioritization and decision-making about the budget	● ●

Maintenance



Definition

Refers to ongoing management and care of facilities and services by dedicated staff to ensure the space remains safe, functional, and welcoming, thereby supporting consistent community access and engagement.



Key Assessment Methods

- Public Space Assessment
- Survey
- Site / Operator Interview
- Public Life Observation
- Focus Group
- Photo Journaling
- Desktop Research

Level of connection	Signal	Description	Method
0 Baseline Criteria The space is NOT adequately maintained.	Uncleanliness		●
	Physical markers of neglect		● ● ●
1 Familiarity The space is clean and well-maintained by dedicated staff.	Perception of cleanliness	Share of respondents who feel the space is clean and cared for	● ● ●
	Physical markers of care	Absence of litter and vandalism; perception of public space quality	●
	Adequate staffing	The site is not understaffed; Staff have adequate resources to fulfill their duties; Greeters / staff are visible and available	● ● ●
2 Relationships Dedicated staff actively respond to community needs through regular monitoring.	Perception of service quality	Share of respondents who feel that their needs are met at the site	● ● ●
	Responsive service	Updates to the programs are services are based on community feedback and needs assessments	● ●
3 Community Visitors feel a sense of responsibility to take care of the place.	Acts of stewardship	% of respondents participating in stewardship or advocacy relating to the site	● ●
	Support for public spending	% of respondents who support increased public spending for the site	● ●
	Community problem- solving	Number of community-led initiatives (e.g., cleanups, resource-sharing networks, local planning) facilitated by or hosted at the site	● ●
	Importance & identification	% of respondents who say the site is important to them, their community or the city	●



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