



Y-PLAN Public Space Policy Brief

Good public spaces – where people can and want to gather with no or low barriers to entry – are hard to find these days. Y-PLAN scholars assert that these spaces, in the physical and digital realms, are critical to the well-being of us all.

Y-PLAN Youth InSight: Public Space

INTRODUCTION

Public space is a nebulous concept. It is inclusive of publicly-owned amenities – streets, transit, parks and plazas, schools, libraries, community centers – as well as some privately-owned sites that serve a public purpose – like cafes, places of worship, sports stadiums, some university grounds and privately operated public spaces ([POPOS](#)). The word “public” implies everyone has equal access, but that is not always true in practice – young people, and particularly young people who are low-income and Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), are made to feel unwelcome or excluded in many public spaces, by the built environment, police, and [other users](#).

Public space is crucial to our collective well-being. Good quality public space has the possibility to change lives – “to create a more equal, prosperous, and democratic society,” ([TheCityFix](#)). Social scientists assert that public spaces can have myriad positive outcomes for individuals and communities: “They shape neighborhood ties... They militate against loneliness... They can encourage community action, facilitate political mobilization, help prevent crime and support the socialization of young people” ([In defense of the realm](#), 2017). Trips to greenspace have been found to have positive impacts on a child’s ability to weather

childhood trauma, with doctors from UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital in Oakland, CA concluding that “Parks are a resource for pediatric resilience,” ([Clinic and park partnerships for childhood resilience](#), 2019). Increasingly more of our country’s young people live in cities, and so the quality of our urban public spaces will affect their development and all of our futures.

Luckily, the young scholars of the [Y-PLAN](#) (Youth - Plan Learn Act Now) initiative, who are primarily low-income young people of color, are uniquely situated – and ready – to offer valuable insight regarding the state of public spaces in our cities. Combining their experience within their community with data collected through the Y-PLAN process, the scholars produce policy recommendations in dialogue and collaboration with civic leaders. Some of the student findings include design recommendations for new forms of public spaces to be culturally significant to communities at risk of gentrification and displacement. Other student ideas challenge us to rethink what a transit system could and should be. Some students even question if public space must be limited to physical spaces and instead advocate for a digital public sphere. Many of these ideas might never occur to career planners and policymakers. Y-PLAN’s unique process of connecting student scholars with civic leaders (their “clients”) has even enabled some student recommendations to be actualized. Assembled from Y-PLAN projects in New York City and the Bay Area, these findings repeatedly emphasized that expanding the Public Commons, viewing Transportation Networks as Public Space, and valuing Community Input in the Design of Public Spaces as critical to the future of urban public spaces.

Looking forward, Y-PLAN’s work continues largely in California, where 95.5% of young people live in urban areas (U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Sept. 2018). However, the work occurs not in isolation but serves to inform - and is informed by - national and global planning and policy.

A METHODOLOGY FOR ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN PUBLIC SPACE

Today, children and youth often comprise more than 30% of a city’s population. Demographers predict that number will rise to 60% by 2030 ([ARUP](#)). Still, they are rarely incorporated into meaningful planning and policymaking conversations and processes. Projections hold that three quarters of the entire population is expected to live in cities by 2050, so the exclusion of young people will only grow more apparent as our world continues to urbanize. While planners may consider how to plan FOR young people, rarely do they plan WITH young people at the table. Y-PLAN, housed within the UC Berkeley Center for Cities + Schools, uses a five-step participatory action research methodology to prepare entire classes of students to address authentic civic problems posed to them by city leaders, flipping the script of project- and work-based learning. These questions are posed to students with the belief that these city challenges can only be solved in conjunction with young people. Committed to shifting existing power dynamics and bridging divisions between young people and adults, Y-PLAN prioritizes the voices of low-income young people of color in planning for cities now and in the future.



Expanding the Public Commons

Y-PLAN students see opportunities to expand public spaces by leveraging technology to provide:

- **Online public spaces, to integrate new community members and connect everyone to shared resources**

- **Opportunities for greater civic engagement, like participatory budgeting**

Y-PLAN students do not feel beholden to the traditional idea that public space is limited to the physical realm. In 2014, scholars from Grover Cleveland High School in Queens, New York, were asked: "How can technology be used to assist New Yorkers with hearing loss navigate the city?" Their answer was to utilize the digital public commons - building six free mobile applications (available on GooglePlay) to improve the day-to-day experience of hard of hearing New Yorkers.

In 2016, Grover Cleveland students were challenged to answer the question: "How can we improve community and visitor use of Forest Park and surrounding community?" The students then created a suite of mobile applications to boost interest and engagement with their local greenspace, including "Forest Park Birding," "Who is Buried in Forest Park?" and "Reservoir Racing," among others. After tweaking them following feedback from their client – New York City Council Member Elizabeth Crowley – the applications were released in the Google Play Store, so that anyone (with an Android) could access them!

In 2018, students in a computer science course also at Grover Cleveland created several applications to connect immigrants in Brooklyn and Queens to resources within their community. "Ridgevoyage" helped recent arrivals navigate the neighborhood of Ridgewood, Queens while "Subway Fresh" helped familiarize newcomers with the MTA Metrocard, lowering barriers to using transit. The students claimed digital space to help users connect more easily with the public spaces and amenities in their areas.

Similarly innovative, students from Williamsburg High School for Architecture and Design helped to further participatory budgeting efforts in New York, enabling more community members to participate. Working with their local Councilperson and their District Participatory Budgeting Committee, students helped to articulate projects that should be considered and to create visuals to help the public better understand those proposed projects. One project advanced by the students – paving the sidewalks in Msgr. McGolrick Park to improve safety and accessibility – was approved by the community. These findings show that an expansive view of the public commons – inclusive of the digital world and governmental process – have intrinsic value and result in positive change in physical public spaces as well.



Transportation Networks as Public Space

Y-PLAN students understand that transportation networks are public space and can do more to promote social cohesion/wellbeing by providing:

- *Seating*
- *Bathrooms*
- *Public Art*
- *Wifi & Charging Stations*
- *Heat Lamps*
- *Good Lighting*

Though we don't often think of them as such, much of our urban transportation networks are public space - including our roads, sidewalks, and much of our public transit systems. Y-PLAN student scholars see these networks as opportunities for communities to assert their rights as users of these systems and members of the public.

High school students at Skyline High and Oakland High in the African American Male Achievement Initiative wanted their client – the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) – to make stations more comfortable by providing public art, benches, better lighting, device charging stations, heat lamps, bathrooms and free Wifi service. These improvements suggest to riders that they are welcome at BART. A particularly visionary set of students proposed using BART stations as “21st Century Libraries” where students would be able to do their schoolwork in comfort and safety. After finding that the capital costs for installing public Wifi throughout the system would be substantial, the students suggested approaching local technology firms to “sponsor” the project, as has been done at airports in the region.

On a similar note, although we've been conditioned in this country to cede roads to moving and parked cars, they are public space. As an integral part of the urban fabric, Y-PLAN scholars know that it is critical to create roads and streetscapes that are safe and pleasing places to be, not just to pass through. Guided by their mission statement that “We as students assert that Bushwick is is a community worthy of beautiful things!” students from Brooklyn's EBC High School for Public Service proposed a massive public art installation along a stretch of Broadway that would resonate with community members. They secured a quarter of a million dollars in funding, with the help of their client, Council Member Antonio Reynoso, and the Department of Transportation, and the “[walking gallery](#)” was installed by the community in 2018. The [art](#) speaks to the area's history and the resilience of their community, as gentrification and displacement creep closer each day.



[Source image](#)

Also in the spirit of reclaiming our public spaces, students at MetWest High School in Oakland worked with AC Transit, a bus transit service providing local and TransBay connections to and from the East Bay, to improve transit riders' experience of the streetscape that forms the transit network. After surveying over 200 riders, scholars found that most wanted Benches and Shelters at their bus stops. Also working on behalf of AC Transit, Berkeley High students proposed a bus stop parklet system, identified key stops to include in a pilot program, and provided models to the agency of what those spaces might look like. The findings of the student scholars informed AC Transit's ongoing work and resulted in the first parklet bus stop in the nation located in Albany, CA ([East Bay Times](#)).

Community Input in the Design of Public Space

Y-PLAN scholars recommend community participation in the design of public spaces and amenities to create:

· *Culturally Relevant Public Spaces*

· *Public Art*

· *A sense of community ownership and belonging*

The mantra “If you build it, they will come,” may work in the movies, but students, planners and partners know that the community must be involved in the planning of any successful public space ([Project for Public Spaces](#)). As stated by project partner Shannon Ladner-Beasley from Public Health Solutions/Contra Costa Health Services, regarding community buy-in and the participation of students: [“If they build it, they will come back.”](#)

Like the students at Brooklyn’s EBC High School, students at East Palo Alto Phoenix Academy (EPAPA) in the San Francisco Peninsula are painfully aware of the pressures of gentrification. Students at both schools found innovative ways to honor the cultural legacy of their neighborhoods in the amenities that they proposed, while hoping to increase the sense of belonging for those feeling the threat of displacement. In Brooklyn’s Bushwick neighborhood, this took the form of the aforementioned public art project to “Brighten [the] Broadway” corridor.

In East Palo Alto, students suggest the construction of a Plazita, which would transform an identified vacant lot into a public plaza that celebrates the Latino culture in East Palo Alto, with incentives for local residents to become both vendors and patrons of the space, creating a sense of community ownership. The students asserted that the space can “build bridges between new and long-term residents, improve the local area, and highlight the culture” of East Palo Alto. Students constructed a model of the envisioned plaza, inspired by public plazas found throughout Mexico, intending to evoke a sense of familiarity for students and families.

In an innovative collaboration spanning ages and cultures, Y-PLAN elementary schoolers from Richmond, CA and high schoolers from the Tohoku region of Japan proposed and implemented their public space designs. In spring 2019, fifth grade students at Verde Elementary School in North Richmond, California were challenged to respond to the question: “How can we beautify the public spaces in our neighborhood while celebrating our community history and pride?” In response, students proposed recreational fields, an educational art and nature trail alongside a local creek, pop-up parklets, and murals highlighting community history and pride. During that summer, a hundred students in the Tomodachi SoftBank Leadership Program came to UC Berkeley to learn the Y-PLAN methodology. While here, they reviewed the recommendations outlined by the Verde Elementary scholars and identified three sites where they could apply those proposals during a Day of Action. Working alongside community stakeholders, the students created three murals and one pocket park ([Y-PLAN Blog](#)).

CONCLUSION

The findings from these Y-PLAN case studies reveal that students are able to understand the issues and the tools being used in the planning field today. Further, when students are armed with planning expertise through Y-PLAN, they are able to reflect on their lived experience as young people and community members and identify challenges and opportunities that might be invisible to others, such as industry & civic leaders and public officials. When considering public space, they see a need to get creative and to consider Transportation Networks as Public Space, Community Input in the Design of Public Spaces, and Expanding the Public Commons beyond the physical realm. Y-PLAN teaches students the professional expertise they need to undertake planning work while valuing the knowledge inherent in their lived experience.



Quality public space has the possibility to change lives but to do so, we need to make sure it exists and is inviting, accessible, and safe for all people to use. Y-PLAN student scholars have ideas supported by data on what their communities want and have the wherewithal to make those ideas a reality.

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