

Communities Adapt during COVID-19:
The Role of Public Space as a Communicative Space

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused immense disruptions in community life. People needed not just supplies and information but social support. In response to the decrease of in-person social interaction, this study investigates the role that public space plays – such as sidewalks, parks, or parking lots – as essential communicative spaces for social well-being during a pandemic. Focusing on the first ten months of lockdown in the Puget Sound region of Washington State, this study asks: What actions or activities did individuals facilitate or engage in to support the social well-being of their local community or neighborhood during the pandemic of 2020? Why? What was the communicative intent of these activities? How was public space utilized or adapted for these actions or activities? What can we learn about the design of neighborhood public spaces as communicative spaces? Based on this, how can cities better support communities during challenging times? Using a Grounded Theory Method approach, this exploratory study analyzed over a hundred different pandemic-related activities drawn from various local sources. The study documents the creative ways the public used and adapted public space to enhance social well-being, suggesting what lessons can be learned by this experience.

“Social distancing might be a term brought about by our response to COVID-19, but social togetherness is what we have really created.” May 2020.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned the world upside-down and brought tremendous change in people’s lives, including stress due to job loss, school closures, and general uncertainty. It has created barriers in people’s ability to engage with each other, potentially isolating people. Because of its duration and limitations on travel, the pandemic underscored the need for social support and resilience at the neighborhood level.

This study investigates what people did at a neighborhood level within their local communities to support each other. While many events became virtual, including but not limited to classes, churches, and work meetings, this study looks at the role of outdoor public space in facilitating social togetherness during a pandemic. Prior research suggests that people who engage in significantly more face-to-face than virtual interactions with friends, family, and acquaintances self-report higher levels of quality of life, more long-term relationships, and a stronger presence of social support in their lives (Lee et al., 2011).

The introductory quote is from an online blog, *Yes! Magazine*, where people detailed what their neighborhood did to support each other during the pandemic. Those social media posts seem to suggest that while social distancing meant people couldn’t physically be together, a feeling and sense of community arose during the early months of the pandemic and that public space played an important role. In Spring 2020, the mainstream media also started covering stories on social togetherness and community activities with headlines such as: “Being Together While Staying Apart” (*New York Times*); “Need to smile? 7 heartwarming ways Bay Area communities are coming together during the coronavirus pandemic” (*ABC News*); and

“Neighbors find powerful ways to stay connected amid Seattle’s coronavirus social distancing” (*The Seattle Times*). These anecdotal accounts prompted this investigation into the specific ways that people were reaching out and socially supporting each other using public space.

For the purposes of this study, public space is an outdoor space that can be viewed, used, or accessed by the general public. Public spaces in cities are typically thought of as city parks, streets, squares or plazas, and sidewalks. However, this study also includes “public-facing” spaces, such as front yards or parking lots in this definition because such spaces can also facilitate verbal and nonverbal communication within a community.

In normal times, people meet in spaces like cafes, grocery stores, parks, sidewalks, and other shops where they converse and exchange information. During the pandemic, as this study



1

will detail, people found safe ways around their normal meeting places to meet, communicate, and support each other, utilizing public spaces – sometimes in very creative ways. In Bellingham, Washington, this masked statue of a rhinoceros was visible in a public-facing space, a resident’s front yard (photo 1). This humorous and creative reminder for others to wear a mask communicated that people cared about their community’s well-being.

Through the analysis of over a hundred such activities, this study explores how public space was used as a supportive, communicative space for people during the pandemic. With both scholars and cities looking for strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of future pandemics, this study can provide insight into how public space can contribute to building community resilience.

Literature Review

The Role of Public Space in Fostering Everyday Social Togetherness

Public spaces promote neighborhood connectivity – or diverse ways for a neighborhood or community to make connections and interact (Cattell et al., 2008, pp. 547). Public spaces encourage social communication and information exchange, play and activity, and opportunities to share experiences as a community, contributing to an everyday sense of social togetherness. According to Cattell et al., in their 2008 study of the relationship between public spaces, well-being, and social relations, the importance of “everyday neighborhood spaces” cannot be understated. They write: “Social interaction in public spaces... can provide relief from daily routines, sustenance for people’s sense of community, opportunities for sustaining bonding ties or making bridges and can have a direct influence on well-being by raising people’s spirits” (Cattell et al., 2008, p. 556).

How does this occur? Ray Oldenburg, an urban sociologist, coined the term ‘third place’ as areas that people can regularly visit and meet friends, neighbors, coworkers, and strangers (Bosson et al., 2010, p. 780). Third places or bumping spaces (a term used more commonly in England, Australia, and other areas of the world) are places where people bump into each other, chat, and carry on about their daily lives. Such places are at supermarkets or local malls, in front of the post office, or on pedestrian-friendly city streets. Chase & Rivenburgh (2019) expand on this concept in their description of Communication-Rich Environments (CRE), which they suggest can be “places, spaces, or events, permanent or temporary, physical or online, as long as they are tied to a particular neighborhood or geographic community” (p. 64). Advocates of mixed-use, pedestrian, and age-friendly neighborhoods build on this idea of third places, bumping spaces, and Communication-Rich Environments to argue that the layout of

neighborhood public space can be an important contributor to the degree of social interaction in a community (Chase & Rivenburgh, 2019, pp. 22-24).

According to these researchers, the importance of meet-and-greet interactions in public spaces is that they create “lite relationships” that contribute to a community’s social capital. Social capital refers to “the social and psychological well-being and sense of belonging people feel when part of a community” (Chase & Rivenburgh, 2019, p. 63). Lite relationships, or weak ties, occur when “people are willing to trust, reciprocate, collaborate and exchange information, but are short of the pressures and constraints that can accompany familial or close friend relationships” (Chase & Rivenburgh, 2019, pp. 63-64). This important community – and communication – process is a product of people’s brief interactions in “everyday neighborhood spaces” such as grocery stores or coffee shops and builds the community ties mentioned by Cattell et al. (2008) above. These lite relationships can also be linked to our subjective well-being and happiness levels (Dunn et al., 2014; Francis et al., 2012).

The Role of Public Space as a Communal Place for Times of Need

In addition to its function as spaces for daily use and movement (Francis et al., 2012), public space is also crucial in allowing people to come together for celebrations, community events, and in times of crisis. They have been places for large or small gatherings for vigils, protests, festivals, and more. Of interest here is the role of public space during a crisis.

Based on research about natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes, we know that people often step up to help each other during times of crisis, but what is the role of public space? A New Zealand study on levels of community resilience in the aftermath of a natural disaster provides valuable insight (Banwell & Kingham, 2011). The research compared community responses in several towns surrounding Christchurch, New Zealand after the

devastating 2011 earthquake. The researchers found that in the towns where people regularly congregated in third places (or bumping spaces) during normal times, the community fared better and was more resilient in the aftermath of the earthquake. This is because residents immediately went to their local third places to find others, ask for help, or learn updates. This study confirmed a strong correspondence between neighborhood public spaces and social support during a crisis. But what happens when the crisis itself is drawn out over months? What happens when gatherings are not possible?

The first research evidence related to public space and COVID-19 appeared in a study called “Public Space & Public Life during COVID-19” by Gehl (April 2020). Based on field observations, the study documented people’s use of public space in four Danish communities during April 2020 when lockdowns were in place. Researchers found that residents actually engaged in more outdoor play and recreation than usual but did so by remaining very close to home and using neighborhood public spaces, sometimes in resourceful ways if there wasn’t existing exercise or play equipment.

So, while there is some early evidence that people used public space in different ways, there is a gap in research about the social activities or communicative processes that occurred as people sought to support each other during the pandemic. The goal of *this* study is to understand people’s use of public space during a long-term pandemic and provide insight to communication scholars and city officials into the kinds of communicative activities that help support community well-being during that time.

Research Questions

As offered in the introduction, initial observations point to a variety of ways that people used or adapted public spaces to support or uplift others. Sidewalk concerts, teddy bears in

windows, supportive signs, or art displays are examples. This study will investigate and document the range and types of these activities in the Puget Sound by identifying their specific nature, location, and the ways that public space was used.

This study is guided by three research questions:

1. What actions or activities did individuals facilitate or engage in to support the social well-being of their local community or neighborhood during the pandemic of 2020? Why? What was the communicative intent of these activities?
2. How was public space utilized or adapted for these actions or activities?
3. What can we learn about the design of neighborhood public spaces as communicative spaces? Based on this, how can cities better support communities during challenging times?

The third question indicates the desire for this research to have both academic and practical implications.

Methods

Study Approach

This study seeks to better understand how Puget Sound, Washington residents communicated social support through the use and adaptation of public spaces. Because of the duration and unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the approach to the study was exploratory and qualitative. This study looks at real life, focusing on what happened outdoors in neighborhoods around Puget Sound. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state, “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 2).

Data Collection

This study collected data throughout communities in the densely populated Puget Sound area – with a particular focus on the largest city, Seattle. The communities surrounding Puget Sound were hit hard by the pandemic (like many others) and, relevant to this study, experienced immediate and strict COVID-19 lockdown rules.

The unit of analysis is any activity or action that occurred in a public space that was manifest in its intent to support community well-being during the pandemic between March 2020, at the start of COVID-19 lockdowns, through December 2020. This 10-month time frame allows for an understanding of both immediate reactions and long-term responses of communities and individuals to the pandemic.

The data collection process started at the end of this period in December 2020 and continued through February 2021. A wide net was cast for examples of activities in order to meet the guidelines of sufficiency. Having sufficiency in the data collection process means there is a good representation of what happened in the data collected (Barnett et. al., 2018). Data collection stopped after it hit a point of saturation by finding only repeat activities. Data saturation occurs when “further collection of evidence provides little in terms of further themes, insights, perspectives or information in a qualitative research synthesis” (Suri, 2011, p. 72). At that point, more data collection is redundant because similar results show up repeatedly and will not affect the findings or analysis of data further (Saunders et al., 2018). This study cannot claim that the activities collected covered everything that happened but reflect a confidence that the data collected represents the range and types of activities that occurred. After no new types of activities or use of public space arose, the study concluded the data collection with a total of 108 distinct cases.

Sources for data collection included personal communication with neighborhood residents and leaders, outreach to city employees, social media, blogs, website sources, and traditional media, local and national, that covered pandemic-related activities in the Puget Sound region. All personal communication and outreach occurred via email in order to have records of all correspondence. After a short explanation of the study, the author asked people for their observations or experiences involving community members supporting each other in the face of COVID-19 in outdoor settings. The author also became a source through personal observations.

Social media, neighborhood blogs, and websites were another source. On Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, residents documented activities that they saw out on their walks or things that they did themselves. Wherever possible, photos were collected.

There were also searches of a variety of local and national media coverage of the Puget Sound pandemic experience, such as *National Geographic* and Seattle's *King5 News*. Media searches used specific keywords or phrases such as "neighborhoods uplifting each other during COVID-19" and "community help during COVID-19." In particular, 'Year-in-review' articles turned out to be a rich source of information.

To determine what counted for activities, a set of criteria were followed: 1) The activity must have taken place in 2020 with a clear intention to either bring people together, uplift and/or communicate support for the social well-being of the community in response to COVID-19; 2) The activity must have taken place in or be viewable from a public space. An example could be an uplifting message on a sign in someone's front yard, facing the street and sidewalks; and 3) Because this study is interested in neighborhood- or community-level processes, the intended audience or participants for the activity had to involve more than one non-familial person (e.g., a pedestrian viewing the sign on the front yard).

Activities did not count if they happened virtually, as this research stresses the importance of face-to-face contact. The activities could not have taken place because of holidays, birthdays, graduations, the Black Lives Matter movement, or any other events already happening during COVID-19. This would hinder the study's goal of understanding activities taking place because of the pandemic. For example, a socially distanced birthday party would not count because the event would have happened with or without the pandemic. Businesses whose activities involved selling goods or services did not count because the main motivation was to stay in business. Lastly, if there were multiple stories by different sources about the exact same activity in the same location, they were not counted.

Data Analysis

Given the exploratory nature of this study, data analysis was guided by the principles of the Grounded Theory Method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As discussed by Williams and Moser (2019), the Grounded Theory Method is a way to take raw collected data and repeatedly analyze and make sense of the data. The Grounded Theory Method is inductive, meaning "data collection activities (e.g., interview, observation, and artifact review) requires the researcher to be present and be aware of the dynamic nature of the data, its thematic connectivity, intersectionality, and emergence toward theory creation" (Williams and Moser, 2019, p. 47). By the end, this method enables theories to be generated from the data. There are three steps in this method: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

The first step is open coding, which is the process of extracting information from the original sources. For this study, the extracted information was used to create a document of 'reports' which contained pertinent information about each activity. Following the open coding guidelines of Williams and Moser (2019), the information collected to make the reports were

organized into WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY, and HOW (i.e., the 5W's and 1H).

These factual elements were adapted to this study and recorded as follows:

WHO: Who created or sponsored this act/activity? Who experiences or sees the act/activity?

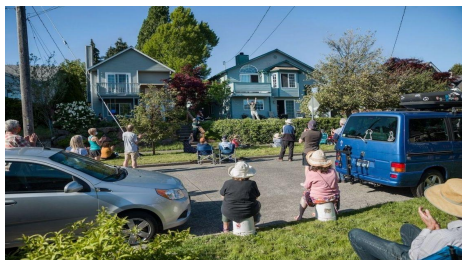
WHAT: What specific act/activity took place? What role(s) did people play in the activity?

WHERE: Name of neighborhood or part of town and city. Location of act/activity.

WHEN: At what frequency? Did the act/activity start early in the pandemic or later?

WHY: Does the original source start with the intent/purpose of or affect/emotions derived from the act/activity? If so, quote the message explicitly conveyed.

HOW: How was the private or public space used or adapted in ways different from non-pandemic use?



2

For example, in photo 2, one of the activities was a man (WHO) performing opera (WHAT) in his front yard (WHERE) to his neighbors (WHO) every weekday evening, early in the pandemic in May (WHEN). He hoped his performances would be a “sonic salve during the coronavirus pandemic” (WHY) by turning his front yard into a stage where he could sing (HOW).

Open coding included making separate documents for each of the 5W's and 1H with further clustering within each document. For example, on the WHAT document, all the “Events” were clustered together, and within that, sub-category codes such as “performances” or “food distribution” were attached to each activity listed.

The second step is axial coding which Williams and Moser (2019) states “further refines, aligns, and categorizes the themes” (p. 50). A new document was made to compile theme

statements. The creation of theme statements involved finding connections and patterns across activities. For example, coding clusters reveal that many businesses (WHO) put supportive messages (WHAT) on billboards (WHERE). A theme statement could be made saying, “Businesses participated in pandemic-related actions primarily through the display of signage.”

The third step is selective coding. Selective coding “enables the researcher to *select* and integrate categories of organized data from axial coding in cohesive and meaning-filled expressions” (Williams and Moser, 2019, p. 52). This entailed clustering and organizing the axial theme statements to create a summary of key findings curated in response to the research questions. These are reported in the Results and Discussion sections below.

To satisfy necessary conditions of validity and reliability, a second person familiar with the goals for this study reviewed at least a third of the original sources, reports, and the coding process. This process allowed for refinements to be made early in the coding process.

Limitations

This study acknowledges that purposive sampling has inherent limitations. From the data collected, the study cannot claim that *all* neighborhoods did these activities or necessarily *why* the activity occurred in a particular neighborhood. Except for a few, most of the activities’ intentions were secondhand accounts via media or personal communication.

Results

This section summarizes the descriptive results of the study. It starts by reporting who created and participated in the pandemic-related activities, then responds to the first two research questions. In doing so, it emphasizes four key summary findings of this study, enumerated below.

1. The ‘Community Reflex’ to Support Each Other was Immediate

This study found that individual residents and groups of residents generated the most activity. These were primarily families, or individuals in their homes in residential neighborhoods initiating activities for others to experience, participate in, or view. In some cases, activities were generated by one household. Other activities became a joint endeavor involving several residents of a block or neighborhood. To a lesser degree, but no less important were activities produced by local artists, businesses, schools, and non-profit organizations.

This ‘Community Reflex’ started early. The majority of activities appeared in the first three months of the pandemic lockdown from March to the end of May 2020. This initial reaction from the community is labeled here as a community reflex because the activities appeared as both an instinctual and immediate response that people had. Communities’ automatic ‘reflex’ was to come together and find ways to alleviate the stress and isolation from the pandemic.

2. Enhancing Community Well-Being through Displays, Participatory Activities, and Events

The first part of the first research question asks, *what actions or activities did individuals facilitate or engage in to support the social well-being of their local community or neighborhood during the pandemic of 2020?* In total, this study documented six types of activities that cluster into three broader categories: displays, participatory activities, and events. They are described below:

Displays

The most prominent activity category was displays which comprised two primary types:

signage and displays of art. Displays popped up in a wide variety of public spaces communicating supportive messages.

Signage. Sign-making was a prominent pandemic-related activity. As will be discussed in more detail below, the messages on the signs communicated support in a variety of ways, from encouraging positive thinking to promoting healthy behavior.



3

Displays of art. These included hearts, chalk drawings, individual art, murals, stencils, masks on various statues, poetry, and theater scenes in Little Free Libraries. Several displays featured humor in both signs and art, such as in photo 3.

Participatory Activities

The second primary category of activity, Participatory Activities, also clustered into two types: *recreational activities* that people could enjoy and participate in and the active *provision of supplies and services*.

Recreation. Following social distancing guidelines did not keep people from doing things together. People involved themselves in activities that they knew others were doing even though they were not physically together. This might be considered a form of ‘imagined’ togetherness. For example, people participated in teddy-bear-in-front-windows or painted-rock scavenger hunts in multiple neighborhoods ‘together,’ just not concurrently. Yet, they did so knowing that others were participating in the scavenger hunt as well. Other recreational activities did bring people together in real-time but socially distanced and masked, such as neighbors meeting to sing at a traffic circle or meeting at a park to roller skate.



4

Provision of supplies and services. Food and masks were given away in a variety of public spaces via food pantries in garages, on sidewalks in front of schools, and other public locations.

Organizations had meal giveaways such as in photo 4, school buses delivered meals to students, and residents made food and masks for neighbors in need.

Events

The third primary category of activity was Events, of which there were again two types: *performances and entertainment, and supportive events.*

Performances and entertainment. Performances and entertainment included music events like residents singing or playing instruments for their neighbors and pop-up concerts (photo 5).



5

Support specific groups. These were events that thanked, acknowledged, or supported the community, such as a planned neighborhood event to make noise to thank healthcare workers.

3. Supporting the Social Well-being of the Community Through Five Primary Messages

The second part of the first research questions asks, *Why? What was the communicative intent of these activities?* While this study intentionally sought out activities that explicitly intended to support the social well-being of the community during the pandemic, five distinct messaging themes emerge that offer more detail about the intent of people's actions. These were most explicit through signs and quotes. This section analyzed: 1) the quotes of creators about their intent; 2) what people said about the activities they participated in; 3) and the explicit

messages written on signs. Listed below in order of prominence, the communicative intent of these pandemic-related activities fell into five messaging themes.

Encourage a sense of togetherness. The first messaging goal was to encourage a sense of



6

togetherness, solidarity, and working together. This was exemplified through messages written on signs such as “Wedgwood Together,” “Seattle we got this. If we work together. Thank you,” “We will get through this together” and as shown in photo 6, “We can do this #WeGotThisSeattle Thank you!” A

resident talking about their neighborhood event said, “New friendships have formed, community connections have deepened. There’s no end in sight for this.” The manager who put on drive-in movie events said, “watching a movie in a socially distanced group offers a sense of normalcy and being together during a time when many feel isolated.”

Lift spirits. The second messaging goal was to make people feel supported, happy, and positive. Positive, explicit messages on signs said happy words such as “You are worthy of Love / Have a wonderful day! / XOXO,” “You can’t chase fear out. You can only let more love in. The opposite of fear isn’t courage, it is compassion,” and “Things that are contagious / Laughter Music Kindness Hope Joy Smiles



7

Dancing Good Deeds” (photo 7). In one personal communication, a friend wrote, “Folks put teddy bears in windows, and *it was really fun* to see them.” A resident putting on a neighborhood art gallery walk said, “We hope our Little Art Galleries *will bring a bright spot* to your day” [italics added].



8

Promote healthy behavior. The third messaging goal was to promote healthy behaviors to mitigate the severity of the pandemic. These messages primarily encouraged the community to do their part to socially distance and to wear a mask. For messages explicitly written on signs, some examples were “Stay healthy,” “Spread love, not germs,” “Handmade Fabric Masks (Free! Up on porch),” (photo 8) and “Stronger Together (but 6’

apart).” When closing streets to drivers and opening them for pedestrians and bicyclists, Seattle’s Department of Transportation blog said, “We’re opening 4 more miles of Stay Healthy Streets to allow for safe physical distancing while walking, rolling, running, skating, and biking over the next week!” A resident from Seattle’s Ballard neighborhood explained, “To help slow the spread of COVID-19, I removed the books from my Little Free Library and transformed it into a Peep Show.”

Comfort people. The fourth messaging goal was to comfort people.

Explicit messages on signs said, “Stay strong,” “It will be OK” (photo 9), “Hang in there,” and a mural that said, “Don’t panic.” A resident enjoying their friend’s public musical performance noted, “Just another human caught up in a worldwide pandemic, he’s focusing on something we could all use right about now. Pure joy.” On a large neighborhood joy board, someone wrote, “The goal is for people to



9

leave behind a little positivity in the midst of scary times.” And through another personal communication, a friend shared her thoughts saying, “I think it is awesome when neighbors light up the street at Christmas. It takes a lot of work, and money to brighten the lives of those

walking by during these dark times. Many neighbors decided to leave up their lights well into February.” A reporter for *King5* news wrote, “[Name of person] is doing her part to make Pioneer Square a more beautiful place to be during this difficult time.” In a separate article, *King5* said, “Now that the entire planet is diseased, distressed and depressed, this Seattle artist is working her healing magic again...”

Acknowledging people. The last messaging goal was to thank and acknowledge people.



10

Primarily, activities and messages were conveyed to thank healthcare and frontline workers. Explicit signs had messages like “Thank you health care workers” (photo 10), and outside a hospital, one read, “Heroes work here.” A resident helping to organize the #Makeajoyfulnoise event to thank healthcare workers said the purpose was “to make a joyful noise letting the healthcare and frontline workers know how much we appreciate them.”

4. The Community Rethinks the Use of Public Space in Times of Need

The second research question asks, *how was public space utilized or adapted for these actions or activities?* The study revealed three key discoveries related to how public space was used: *Diverse Locations*, *Adaptations*, and *Allowances*.

Diverse Locations. During the pandemic, people used all kinds of different locations for activities and messaging across business and residential areas. Locations such as the front areas of people’s homes, including their front porch, front yard, fence, and sidewalk- and street-facing windows (photo 11). People also used poles, trees, and bushes to hang and display supportive



11

messages and sidewalks and streets. People gathered in locations like parking lots and a neighborhood traffic circle. Schools and businesses utilized their billboard signs and storefronts to acknowledge and write messages to the public.

Adaptations. Areas viewable by the public and public space were also adapted for activities. This included front areas of people’s homes being adapted to become stages to perform for neighbors. A resident adapted the Free Little Library to a touch-free little art gallery (photo 12). Residents adapted their garages into pantries for people to donate or take what they needed.



12

Allowances. Businesses or institutions allowed people to shift ‘regular’ activities to new spaces. Business properties allowed places such as parking lots to be used to supply food, host activities, and for friends to meet – such as friends visiting the West Seattle Thriftway parking lot to have coffee every morning (photo 13). Streets became places for exercise, play areas, street art, and outdoor dining space for cafes and restaurants, allowed by the city in the form of city-sponsored



13

street closures, Stay Healthy Streets and Cafe Streets programs in Seattle. The city also allowed traffic circles to become a place for people to gather together. These were all spaces not designed for people to gather, but because of the pandemic, people were given allowances.

Discussion

Based on these findings, Research Question 3 guides this discussion section by asking.

What can we learn about the design of neighborhood public spaces as communicative spaces?

Based on this, how can cities better support communities during challenging times? To answer this final question, this section starts by summarizing three key takeaways of this study. Then it turns to more practical implications of these results, offering five suggestions for how cities can better support the community based on those takeaways. First, the primary takeaways:

Communities actively embraced - and adapted - the use of public space for social connection during the pandemic. Francis et al. (2012) found that public spaces that encourage and facilitate social interaction and connection play a crucial role in creating a sense of community” (4.1). This study confirmed that. Instead of staying inside, people went out and used public spaces to connect and support each other, creating a community of individuals who stepped up, organized, and filled in gaps for support and services within their neighborhoods. Across all of the uplifting and supportive activities that occurred, people were able to continue to follow health guidelines. While no doubt challenging, at a neighborhood level, face-to-face connections were maintained even with social distancing and masking rules.

This study found an important blurring between private and public space during the pandemic. People used their windows, porches, front yards, and fences to communicate with each other during the pandemic through displays, participatory activities, and events. While people may be used to political campaign signs or sports banners during normal times, this blurring of private and public space took new forms during a health crisis.

The promotion of community well-being involved emotive, motivational, and informational messaging displayed in a creative variety of places. A deeper understanding of what well-being means to people emerged through the identification of distinct messaging themes. Supporting community well-being is more than just giving people information and tangible support like supplies. It involves communicating empathy, encouragement, and

promoting a sense of unity and togetherness. The results of this study suggest that understanding more about the variety of ways and places in which people come together during a time of need should be an essential aspect of urban planning and neighborhood design.

Implications for Cities: Support Neighborhood Connectivity

Based on the results of this study, there are several implications and suggestions for city actions and policies both during a crisis and over the longer term.

Prioritize equitable access to public space. Residents responded well to city initiatives. This study found that there is such a



14

thing as a ‘community reflex’ during a crisis. Public space activities intended to promote community well-being started early in the pandemic and continued into the summer when somewhat larger organized events took place, such as drive-in movie nights and roller-skating events. The prominence of outdoor activities during the pandemic confirms the importance of a city being able to move quickly to set up street closure programs such as Seattle’s “Stay Healthy Streets” (photo 14) and expanded use of sidewalks for businesses (“Cafe Streets”). It is equally important that these city programs allow safe access to public space during a crisis to all groups of people in all areas of the city.

It is worth noting that out of 108 public space activities, few identified in this study were age-friendly to elders. Those few activities involved the elderly staying inside and using their windows to enjoy visits. In the same way that residential housing used front porches and yards, it may be appropriate to ensure a front area is visible in senior living areas for seniors to interact

more with the community. This would be thoughtful to their mobility while also allowing them to connect and participate in activities.

Encourage businesses to be more involved as community members. One of the primary ways that businesses supported the community was through displays which ranged from signs with messages to murals. With closed, boarded-up buildings in many locations, businesses collaborated with artists to make storefronts and commercial areas they cluster in look more supportive and uplifting. Businesses also allowed community members to use their parking lots for gathering and meeting together, and organizing the handout of supplies and events. This gave people an open space to socialize and participate in activities. Cities and customers alike should encourage and reward such community participation by businesses.

Allow for more flexible and adapted use of city spaces. “Public spaces are a crucial asset in a time of crisis supporting alternative mobility, providing such important opportunities for recreation and sport and for many poor people, a livelihood” (UN Habitat, 2020, p. 2). Public space should be multifunctional and dynamic. During COVID-19, physical distancing meant people needed more space between each other which is why there needs to be multiple uses for public space whether streets, sidewalks, parks, and more. Even in a pandemic “people still need to go outside, for essential grocery shopping, to work and study, for play and leisure as well as to socialize and mental health” (UN Habitat, 2020, p.2). Turning streets into playgrounds, sidewalks into COVID-19 testing sites, or parks and grassy areas into pop-up farmers markets, all use public space to help people continue to do the essential things they need to do. Dynamic public space can adapt and evolve with the needs of a community and is crucial to the resilience of a city.

Promote neighborhood features that facilitate communication such as building and housing setbacks, parks, and sidewalks. Cities should encourage neighborhood features like front yards, porches, parks, and wide sidewalks, because they enhance neighborhood connectivity during good times and bad. During the pandemic these areas are often at the boundary of private and public space hosted street art, scavenger hunts, exercising, and performances which gave kids, families, and adults activities to enjoy safely. This means that cities should provide incentives for all forms of housing to have front spaces (without large barriers such as fences or bushes blocking street views), as well as promote features such as wide sidewalks.

Expand our view of what is public space. In an article about COVID-19 and the role of public space, John Gendall from the Knight Foundation writes, “More than the designation of a place as public, this sense of shared experience — of people in a place together — has come to so clearly define ‘public space’ through this pandemic” (Gendall, 2020, p.1). We need to look at public space differently, learning from the experiences of the pandemic. Public space has always been an essential infrastructure in a city, and the pandemic has made it more apparent how necessary it is. It has shown us that public space cannot be defined using a rigid set of rules. This research discovered that people found new spaces to gather in order to interact and support each other while following health guidelines. Businesses allowed parking lots to be areas for friends and family to have coffee and organizations to set up temporary events. Cities allowed streets to be used for exercise and gathering. Actions like this argue for public (and public-facing) spaces to have multiple uses, especially during times of need. As Gendell (2020) says, “Public space gives us this unique opportunity to interact with people we didn’t pre-select or choose, so a time like this shows us how critical it is that public spaces are truly public,” quoted from the Knight

Foundation. By expanding our view of what public space is, communities can be better equipped to face unpredictable situations and adapt quickly, leading to more resilient communities.

Conclusion

The results of this study contribute to our understanding of the vital role that public space play as a communicative space. People used and adapted public space in creative ways to support the social well-being of their neighbors. For communication scholars, this study adds to our understanding of public spaces as dynamic spaces where people communicate through words and actions in ways that promote social togetherness and well-being. For urban planners and city officials, the results of this study argue that public spaces are essential infrastructure for maintaining a healthy and resilient city.

This study had limitations that point to the potential for future research. This study only looked at one part of the country, so it cannot say absolutely whether cities and communities elsewhere responded in similar ways. Also, this project only collected activities that occurred in-person when it is not possible to absolutely separate physical and virtual interaction during the pandemic. Several activities, such as teddy bear scavenger hunts, were promoted online.

It is hoped that this exploratory study about public space usage during the pandemic will encourage more detailed investigations into the relationships between neighborhood features and the building of community resilience in preparation for times of crisis or need. For example, how important are sidewalks for neighborhood health and connectivity? Finally, it may be interesting for future researchers to more closely dissect and define the variety of messaging themes found in this research to be part of the concept of community well-being.

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