Trial to help transform a street into one of the world’s great boulevards

Places to Love case study: City of Sydney George Street demonstration project
Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Planning, Industry and Environment acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and pays respect to Elders past, present and future.

We recognise Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ unique cultural and spiritual relationships to place and their rich contribution to society.

Aboriginal people take a holistic view of land, water and culture and see them as one, not in isolation to each other. This case study is based on the premise upheld by Aboriginal people that if we care for Country, it will care for us.

Published by the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment
dpie.nsw.gov.au

Trial to help transform a street into one of the world’s great boulevards, Places to Love case study: City of Sydney George Street demonstration project

Photo on front cover: George Street, Sydney, Places to Love project.

Artwork (left) by Nikita Ridgeway

© State of New South Wales through Department of Planning, Industry and Environment 2021. You may copy, distribute, display, download and otherwise freely deal with this publication for any purpose, provided that you attribute the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment as the owner. However, you must obtain permission if you wish to charge others for access to the publication (other than at cost); include the publication in advertising or a product for sale; modify the publication; or republish the publication on a website. You may freely link to the publication on a departmental website.

Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing (November 2021) and may not be accurate, current or complete. The State of New South Wales (including the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment), the author and the publisher take no responsibility, and will accept no liability, for the accuracy, currency, reliability or correctness of any information included in the document (including material provided by third parties). Readers should make their own inquiries and rely on their own advice when making decisions related to material contained in this publication.
Lord Mayor’s message

The COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp focus just how important our public spaces are - we need to prioritise space for people.

When we cautiously return to the city while seeking to maintain physical distancing, wider footpaths and more space for pedestrians are critical. Creating this space opens new opportunities for businesses, and, crucially, provides places for people to gather and get around safely.

Areas around Haymarket, The Rocks and the city centre were significantly affected by the loss of workers, tourists and international students. We need to rebuild confidence and promote the return of activity in the city. To do that, we need to prioritise access for people to move around safely so we can remain vigilant and reduce the risk of virus outbreaks.

By creating spaces along George Street that people can enjoy, we’re delivering our long-held vision of a world-class city centre, while also assisting with COVID-19 recovery.

This is all part of our long-term vision to provide a calmer, more appealing environment for workers, visitors and residents and to generate a 24-hour city economy. Extending public space will also encourage people to walk through the city, which contributes to a healthy community and neighbourhood.

The Rt Hon the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Councillor Clover Moore

Minister’s message

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, we’ve rediscovered our public and green spaces. The pandemic has caused us to become more conscious of our outdoors - fresh air, natural light and safe places to meet and enjoy community. I’m determined to channel this new found delight in our shared spaces into transformative action. Let’s convert forgotten empty spaces into memorable public places.

The NSW Government is recognising the incredible value of our shared environments by reinvigorating and reimagining public spaces, with Places to Love - a range of community and council-led demonstration projects.

One of the first six Places to Love neighbourhood projects is George Street in Sydney’s CBD.

George Street holds iconic status, connecting Sydney Harbour, The Rocks and Circular Quay to Sydney Town Hall, Central Station and other major transport hubs. Since 1788, it’s been the city’s main thoroughfare and one of Australia’s most recognisable streets.

We want to reimagine George Street as a place for people, rather than cars. These changes will help George Street achieve its enormous potential and welcome back the hive of locals, workers, tourists, retailers.

That’s why the NSW Government has devoted an additional $1 million to create a lasting pedestrian precinct in support of the Government’s Priority to deliver Greener Public Spaces.

This means, from Bathurst Street to Rawson Place, about 9,000 square metres of additional public space will be available to pedestrians and cyclists. And when the time comes to emerge from this lockdown, it will no doubt return as the vibrant spine of our city once again.

It’s a radical transformation that will enhance George Street’s iconic status as one of the world’s great boulevards.

The Honourable Rob Stokes, Minister for Planning and Public Spaces Minister for Transport and Roads

Photo: George Street, Sydney, Places to Love project
Introduction

This case study outlines the approach City of Sydney and the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment took in partnership to test changes to George Street. It also seeks to help communities, industry, councils and NSW Government learn from this experience and take action in creating more great public spaces.

George Street runs 3km in length through the centre of the City of Sydney from Sydney Harbour and the historic area of The Rocks to Central Station. The vision for George Street is for it to be Sydney’s civic boulevard.

The north section of George Street, between Hunter and Bathurst streets, was transformed into a pedestrian boulevard as part of the CBD and South East Light Rail construction in 2019. The vision for the project was to extend the pedestrian boulevard of George Street south from Bathurst Street to Rawson Place, Haymarket.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted (as it continues to do) how important space is to allow people to maintain a safe physical distance in the city. The extension of the pedestrian boulevard aligns with the City of Sydney’s vision for a safer, more people-friendly George Street, and creates an opportunity to build on the success of the already-pedestrianised boulevard to the northern end.

The Places to Love Program enabled the extension of the George Street pedestrian corridor through a temporary trial.

The Places to Love Program aimed to:

- demonstrate safe and inclusive place-based experiences in public spaces that reflect their local character and function.
- demonstrate ways to improve the quality of public spaces and public life.
- grow an understanding that public space is wide ranging and includes open spaces, public facilities and streets.
- encourage local government areas, NSW Government, industry and communities to reimagine streets and spaces as places for people.

Places to Love

Places to Love is a program where councils and the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment collaborate to pilot new and innovative demonstration projects in public spaces. It is a key strategy to deliver the Government’s Priority – Greener public spaces. In 2020-21, 6 councils have partnered with the program, including City of Sydney for the George Street pedestrianisation. The other 5 participating councils are Blacktown City Council, Burwood Council, Liverpool City Council, Penrith City Council and Wagga Wagga City Council.

The demonstration projects were a way to test how to make public spaces more vibrant and active through temporary changes. The pilot councils used pop-ups and semi-permanent changes to test ideas and build the case for longer-term change.
Public space and public life

Public spaces are our open spaces, public facilities and streets. They are publicly owned, or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all free of charge. Public spaces are the heart of our communities.

A space becomes a ‘place’ when people have made it meaningful. A place is more than its geographic location. It is a unique combination of physical form, the activities that occur there and the sense of place attachment: that is, how people feel about the place. Great places provide diverse opportunities for social interactions, have a strong character, and are welcoming, inclusive and beautiful. Many great places are also our public spaces.

Public life is the social activity that occurs in public space – the interactions between neighbours, family, friends and the broader community that create delight and make life more meaningful. It is in our public spaces that we can connect 365 days a year. Public spaces support our happiness, health and wellbeing, environmental resilience, and prosperous local economies.

The Places to Love Program aims to test and trial concepts to improve public space and public life with our local communities by partnering with pilot councils.

Photos: A colourful painted design unified the reclaimed concrete seating and asphalt, providing a place for people to connect.
Project description
The City of Sydney worked with the NSW Government to temporarily close George Street between Bathurst Street and Rawson Place. The northbound and southbound traffic lanes were closed using temporary rubber kerbs and bollards with water-filled barriers at intersections.

Reallocating traffic lanes next to the existing footpath increased space for people to walk.

Once the lanes were closed to traffic, concrete logs and cubes were installed to provide seating. The lanes and concrete seats were then painted to provide colour, vitality, better amenity for people walking and to encourage use.

Photo: Installation of the painted design along the asphalt
Project vision

To provide a more people-friendly George Street with wider footpaths, and new spaces for businesses to operate, while attracting people back to the city centre.

Project aims and objectives

The aim of the project was to encourage people to use the newly created public space on George Street south. City of Sydney did this by creating additional seating and painted visual cues.

The primary objective was to ensure people could maintain physical distancing and safely return to the city centre.

An additional objective was to gauge community support for the new pedestrian space. This informed the City of Sydney’s proposal to permanently pedestrianise the area.

Photo: Temporary demonstration project to pedestrianise George Street
Sydney’s George Street is the city centre’s main north-south axis, connecting Circular Quay to Central Station and bus and light rail interchanges. The recent introduction of light rail has transformed parts of George Street from a 2.5km congested roadway to a traffic-calmed boulevard. The northern half of George Street was pedestrianised between Hunter and Bathurst streets, transforming it from a place for cars into an attractive, sunlit promenade for people.

The southern half of George Street between Bathurst Street and Rawson Place remained open to vehicular traffic when the light rail was completed. At just under 1km (780m) in length, this stretch of road corridor ranges from 22m to 30m in width, with footpaths that are in some places 3m to 3.5m wide. While the street has a good aspect for sunlight during lunchtimes, pedestrian congestion made the footpath space unpleasant.

On 3 July 2020, City of Sydney secured approval from Transport for NSW for the temporary closure of road lanes on:

- the eastern side of George Street between Bathurst Street and Rawson Place.
- the western side of George Street between Bathurst Street and Ultimo Road.
- Hay Street between George Street and Sussex Street.

Concurrently, City of Sydney partnered with the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment on the Places to Love Program. As a result of the partnership, the temporary road lane closures added another 4,500m² of pedestrian space, effectively doubling the width of footpaths and creating more space for walking, socialising and physical distancing.

The City of Sydney observed initially that pedestrians were not using the additional road space. It appeared most pedestrians were avoiding the newly reclaimed space because it still looked and felt like a place for vehicles only.

Changing the appearance of the road surface and adding seating were cost-effective visual cues to invite people into the space and let them know it was now safe to walk and dwell.

Given the extra space, there is opportunity for outdoor dining and additional street trees and furniture in the future.

Figure 1: Map of the pedestrianised area of George Street between Town Hall and Central Station.
Strategic alignment

Rationale
The George Street project supports the goals of Sustainable Sydney 2030 – the City of Sydney’s long-term plan for a more green, global and connected city, which was shaped by community consultation. Specifically, it supports Sustainable Sydney 2030 project idea 2: Three City Squares as outdoor meeting places on the George Street civic boulevard, Circular Quay, Town Hall and Central. The project was a collaborative process with the department and the City of Sydney, it contributed to the ambition of the Government’s priority for Greener Public Spaces.

Project enablers
The COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for the project. It highlighted the need for more space for people to safely maintain physical distancing. The public health orders and lockdowns associated with managing the pandemic reduced traffic in the city centre and created an opportunity to use existing road carriageways in George Street as additional space for people to walk.

This enabled the temporary closure of traffic lanes on the eastern and western sides of George Street between Bathurst Street and Rawson Place, creating more space for pedestrians returning to the city centre.

Project governance
The City of Sydney’s team included a:
• project manager – responsible for the day-to-day management and delivery of the project.
• design manager – responsible for the design.
• communications manager – responsible for community engagement and reporting.

The department’s team included a program manager and a program officer. City of Sydney and the department held fortnightly meetings to review progress, identify any project issues and risks and to discuss necessary assistance.
Planning and design

Concept plan

Activating George Street between Bathurst Street and Rawson Place included providing concrete logs and cubes that were relocated and recycled from the pedestrianised area north of Bathurst Street. Transport for NSW donated these elements, which they had originally used to deter hostile vehicles during construction of the light rail. They were repurposed as public seating south of Bathurst Street.

In addition to the road closure and public seating, the closed roadway was painted to encourage pedestrian use and make the area look less like a place for vehicles. Initially, some temporary road decals were installed to invite pedestrians to walk on the closed lanes, but more encouragement was necessary. The decision to paint circles in different colours provided a semi-permanent layer to the decals and added some vibrancy and amenity to the roadway. Originally a more dramatic ‘asphalt to art’ concept was proposed but the design was cost prohibitive to cover the entire roadway with colour. The repetitive individual circles were a helpful way to reduce cost while still having a positive impact.

The use of ramps to give pedestrians more access from the adjacent footpath was reviewed, but the need to comply with code requirements meant the ramps would be too long and would encroach on useable space. Given that there are existing pedestrian ramps at all intersections and at mid-block crossings, this idea was not pursued further. Planter boxes were also considered to increase shade and colour, but ongoing staff and maintenance costs proved prohibitive.

Figure 2: Concept plan detail of George Street before the project commenced.
Source: City of Sydney
Delivery and implementation

Community and stakeholder engagement and feedback

The stakeholder engagement sought to manage the impacts of change, and achieve the following outcomes:

• The community knows the City of Sydney is working with the NSW Government to pedestrianise the southern end of George Street and is informed about the changes.

• The change is well-managed for directly affected stakeholders, so property owners, businesses and residents along the route understand how the changes will affect them and impacts during implementation are minimised.

• The community – visitors, workers and residents, as well as key stakeholders – is involved in building a new vision for the George Street south area, through activations of the temporarily pedestrianised sections.

• The project meets the expectations of the community and government for a safer, more people-friendly city centre and is actively used by residents, workers, visitors and businesses.

The following activities took place ahead of the temporary closure to inform and engage the community:

• key stakeholder briefing hosted by the CEO of City of Sydney.

• individual briefings with directly affected groups and businesses, including emergency services, and properties with specific access requirements.

• door-knocking businesses on George Street.

• notification sent to more than 14,000 surrounding property owners and occupants.

• project webpage with up-to-date information, maps and contacts.

• online form where people can register for project updates.

• media release and frequently asked questions to raise community awareness.

• dedicated staff to respond to questions and concerns.

Community sentiment was monitored to help inform future plans for the space.

The City of Sydney received 31 community enquiries about the temporary closure. Feedback was largely neutral or positive towards the closure. Enquirers welcomed the opportunity to improve pedestrian access, the local amenity and outdoor activation and dining. Key issues for businesses included property access, and loading, parking and servicing. The City of Sydney’s plans to permanently pedestrianise the area was subject to further community consultation.

“Just a quick email to say I fully support the proposed pedestrianisation of the entire length of George St!

Local resident

I think the plan to extend the pedestrian zone for George Street is brilliant and should be made permanent. I think the more the CBD is made car free and available to pedestrians and cyclists the better.

Local resident”
COVID-19 impacts

The impact of COVID-19 throughout 2020 and 2021 has been severe in the City of Sydney local area because there is such a high concentration of businesses and a substantial number of jobs in the sectors that were hard hit by the pandemic. These include professional services, food and beverage, retail, the arts and accommodation. Workers and visitors make up more than 80% of the people who are in the city every day and account for more than 80% of expenditure in the local government area. Since the start of the 2020–21 pandemic, there has been an estimated 90% drop in the number of people on central Sydney streets. Business viability is threatened by reduced visitation and consumer expenditure.

As the public health orders change to respond to the pandemic, the City of Sydney will continue to re-open the city safely and mitigate concerns so that people can re-engage with city life and businesses.

The transformation of George Street is a much-needed catalyst to revitalise the city centre. The closure of the street to traffic has provided more space for pedestrians returning to the city and enabled physical distancing.

Added challenges in delivering the project included delivery delays for products such as the temporary kerbs and bollards, which were sourced from Victoria and held up by state border closures in 2020.

Approval processes

The temporary closure of the southbound traffic lanes on George Street between Bathurst Street and Campbell Street was carried out by Transdev as part of the light rail works. It was not reopened following handover of the public domain to the City of Sydney on 3 July 2020, when all roads authority functions outside of the Permanent Light Rail Corridor were handed back to the City of Sydney, helping to create an initial lane closure for pedestrians.

The City of Sydney maintained the southbound lane closure and extended it to Rawson Place. Council also closed the northbound traffic lanes of George Street from Bathurst Street to Ultimo Road under section 115 of the Roads Act 1993.

On 8 May 2020, the NSW Government issued a media release announcing an extension of George Street’s car-free zone in the city in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

On 3 July 2020, Transport for NSW approved a traffic management plan for the temporary road closures.

City of Sydney forwarded details of the proposed closure to the Central Sydney Traffic and Transport Committee. The temporary closure included parking changes in surrounding streets to improve loading and pick-up and set-down opportunities.

Relocating and placing concrete cubes (seating) within the closed lanes was undertaken as exempt development under the State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP Infrastructure) 2007.

Painting the carriageway did not constitute exempt development under the City of Sydney Local Environment Plan (LEP) 2012 or the SEPP (Infrastructure) 2007. A review of environmental factors for painting the road carriageways was identified as ‘development permitted without consent’ under SEPP (Infrastructure) 2007 and assessed and granted approval under part 5 of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979.

Photo: Concrete block seating was spaced to allow for physical distancing options
### Timeline

**2020**

- **3 July**
  - Approval and handover of the George Street public domain from Transport for NSW to City of Sydney

- **13 July**
  - Temporary closure of traffic lanes

- **6 August**
  - Relocation of concrete cubes to provide seating

- **25 August**
  - Installation of temporary road decals

- **12 October**
  - Approval to paint road

- **2 November**
  - Painting of asphalt vehicle lanes and temporary seating

- **beginning March 2021**
  - Staged replacement of temporary trial to permanent upgrade

### Cost breakdown

#### Activation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Road decals – supply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Installation of decals – City of Sydney staff time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Planning advice – review of environmental factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Carriageway painting*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Fees (road opening fee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Barrier hire (July to December 2020)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Approximate total** $100,000

*Primary capital works cost

#### Communications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Temporary closure notification – print and distribution*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Translation service for notification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Photography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Online promotion (Sydney Your Say website, Sydney City News &amp; Sydney Your Say eDM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Paint install notification – print &amp; distribution (awaiting invoice)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Approximate total** $30,000

*Primary cost of communications

**Total approximate expenditure for demonstration project** $130,000
Analysis

Data collection key findings

The Evaluation Tool for Public Space and Public Life is an observational survey developed by the department. It was used throughout the project to document trends in pedestrian activity, including before the temporary closure occurred. Surveys were undertaken at four locations on George Street including day and night time, in the months of: July, August, September, November and December 2020.

Following the closure of the street to vehicles, there was generally an increase in the number of pedestrians using the street, with a slight decrease in some locations in November. This may be due to weather, as it was overcast with light rain on the day observations were made in November.

The location where most people were observed to be sitting or standing was outside the cinemas (shown as L#1 on Figure 5: Map showing the four locations of where the surveys were taken), where most of the concrete seats were installed. The afternoon/early evening was when the street was usually its busiest.

Observational surveys will continue as City of Sydney progress with plans to permanently pedestrian the space.

Photo: The site was assessed by staff from the City of Sydney and the department with the Evaluation Tool, before, during and after the project.
Figure 3: Average pedestrian count
Source: City of Sydney

Figure 4: Average number of people sitting/standing
Source: City of Sydney

Figure 5: Map showing the four locations of where the surveys were taken

The location where most people were observed to be sitting or standing was outside the cinemas.

Legend
- Project area
- Train station
- Light rail station
- Park
Lessons learnt and key findings

The temporary closure demonstrated community acceptance and support for the pedestrianisation of George Street south, with the majority of enquiries the City of Sydney received being either neutral or positive.

The temporary closure acted as a trial and was a good way to gauge project sentiment. Early conversations with the community helped shape council’s proposal to permanently pedestrianise the street and built the case for additional support from the department.

Key findings include:

• A temporary project can be delivered within a shorter time frame.
• A temporary project can be delivered with more flexibility within planning controls (Infrastructure State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP)/exempt development).
• Timely consultation with key stakeholders and authorities facilitated timely delivery and project support.

Outcomes and conclusions

The temporary trial has demonstrated the need for additional permanent pedestrian space on George Street, with pedestrian numbers generally up since the street was closed to vehicles. More people were observed ‘dwelling’ (sitting or standing) in areas where more concrete seats were installed, such as outside the cinemas. The City of Sydney will continue to monitor trends throughout 2021.

The trial closure also demonstrated community acceptance and support for a pedestrianised George Street. The City of Sydney continues to receive enquiries from George Street businesses interested in using the extra space for outdoor dining, which is another positive outcome.

The project provided the City of Sydney with evidence to progress its plans to permanently convert the closure into a pedestrian boulevard. Construction of the permanent works began in 2021 and based on the trial’s success it was further supported by the NSW Government through the Places to Love Program.

The temporary trial is now being made permanent, creating approx. 9,000m² of new public space along George Street and expanding into other areas in the heart of Sydney’s CBD.
Photo diary

The traffic lane between the light rail corridor and footpath before closure in early 2020

Temporary closure of the vehicle lane

Installation of kerbs and bollards on the area of road closed to traffic

Installation of concrete logs and cubes for seating

A template on the surface of the road for painted circles

Aerial view of the completed project

Decal placed to invite people into the street

Photos courtesy of City of Sydney
For more information please visit:
City of Sydney:
[city.sydney/george-street](city.sydney/george-street)
The Department of Planning, Industry and Environment:
or email [PublicSpace@planning.nsw.gov.au](PublicSpace@planning.nsw.gov.au)