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# Safety & Security in the Public Realm: Building on the Lessons of the Pandemic for the Long Haul

Fear is a great motivator. It has been used for centuries to control the way we build and live in our communities, almost always to bad effect.

On a large scale, fear of nuclear attack was a key factor in motivating the country to build the Interstate Highway System after World War II, which devastated city neighborhoods by facilitating the suburban sprawl that characterizes so much of our landscape today. On a smaller scale, fear of "undesirables" causes park after park and sidewalk after sidewalk to be remodeled without seating, shade, vendors, or other amenities that might encourage the positive public activity that discourages crime and disruption. Time and again these lessons are forgotten or abused, to the extreme detriment of our quality of life.

What we end up with are downtowns and "edge cities" that are alienating, dull and inhuman. They are built on fear, fear of "negative activity," fear of interaction with any other people, fear of crossing the street, even fear of the weather! This fear is self-reinforcing and locks us into a world that is disconnected, difficult, and uninviting.

## Invite the Community to Share Ideas

Safety and fear factors are real, but the methods to counter them do not necessarily have to result in sterile, alienating places. The way to revitalize a public space is to invite the community to share in its design and planning. And people in communities, from merchants to business leaders to residents, have many creative ideas for programs and activities in public spaces, if they could only be given a voice and proper forum to be heard.

In 2020, Pennsylvania Downtown Center (PDC) worked with several communities across the commonwealth on a Designing for Distance (D4D) Pilot Program, a concept that came out of PDC's COVID-19 Recovery and Resiliency Task Force, Public Space Working Group. PDC had an existing grant agreement with Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission (PHMC) to develop a Design Guidelines handbook, but when COVID hit, it became evident that there was an opportunity to develop something that could be more responsive to the needs of the communities, and the D4D project was born.



*Courtesy of Navarro and Wright Consulting Engineers*

# THREE SITES



- C-3 Central Commercial District is for major shopping facilities, offices, entertainment facilities and related uses which serve the entire Erie area.



73 Erie Designing for Distance+ Dignity

*Downtown Erie, Courtesy of the SmithGroup*

The basic premise was to develop design-based solutions to specific social-distancing-related challenges affecting the public realm. Recognizing that sometimes a picture speaks a thousand words, the goal of the D4D program was to provide municipal leaders and the community revitalization organizations with practical design and planning solutions and accompanying implementation strategies to help their businesses and communities adapt to the difficult circumstances created by the pandemic.

## Plans Identified

PDC and PHMC selected the four pilot communities of Easton, Erie, Lewisburg and Reading. Easton and Reading are Certified Local Governments (CLGs), and Erie and Lewisburg could be eligible to apply to be CLGs. Additionally, all four communities are currently designated or recently designated Keystone Communities Main Street programs, and most had past Elm Street programs. The communities represented a variety of

different types of public spaces and configurations that could be relatable and applicable to other communities throughout the commonwealth. Working with four architecture and planning firms with a small stipend, the communities developed conceptual plans to identify each community's individual focus and needs.

In Easton, the Easton Main Street Initiative, part of the Greater Easton Development Partnership, and the City of Easton, worked with creativity, ingenuity and guidance from OSD Outside to focus on creating greater integration and connection between Centre Square, historically the hub of ongoing events and activities, in the City of Easton and the Riverfront. Through Northampton and Sitgreaves and Scott Park to the Riverfront, the focus was expanding outdoor destinations for social distancing, events and gathering while transforming the corridor into a network. Strengthening the pedestrian network from the Centre to the edge, providing safer options for crossing the Larry Holmes Drives to the Riverfront was a key component of this

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# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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project. It also creating more dynamic options for open streets and outdoor lounging, with a combination of movable features mixed in with the more permanent components, as well as incorporating public art and graphics to enliven and energize the space.

## Equitable Spaces

In Erie, the Erie Downtown Partnership and the City of Erie worked with creativity, sensitivity and guidance from the SmithGroup. The focus was based on guiding principles that included an educational component to build empathy to the wider community and to the needs of the homeless residents of downtown, by creating equitable spaces where all people feel welcome, safe, comfortable, and able to fully participate. Together, they worked using Maslow's Law of Hierarchy to determine the needs and wants of the area to include public restrooms, food lockers, warming pods, wind screens, charging stations, murals and more. A variety of options were offered, from quick, cheap and easy tactical interventions to more expensive, permanent features.

Reading's main area of focus was on developing a strategy for safe gatherings along Penn Street, where the majority of events traditionally take place. The Reading Downtown Improvement District Authority and the City of Reading worked with creativity, resourcefulness and guidance from Navarro & Wright Consulting Engineers to identify places where the flow of movement could be made both safer and more fluid.

The focus in Lewisburg was a little different that the other pilots, addressing the increase in outdoor activity and recreation, concentrating on the intersection of Market Street and Water Street, and the Susquehanna River Overlook at the edge of the downtown. The Lewisburg

Neighborhood Corporation, the Lewisburg Downtown Partnership, and the Borough of Lewisburg worked with Guidance from Bergmann on this project, coordinating with PennDOT District 3.0. Alternatives were examined that included traffic calming, multi-modal options, gateway treatments and wayfinding.

Our public spaces need to be designed with flexible uses in mind, always taking into account that a mixture of sun and shade, food, water, and a good view of the passing scene are essentials. In communities across Pennsylvania, we have seen that a good place provides a range of things to do ("uses and activities"); is easy to get to and connected to the surrounding community ("access"); is safe, clean, and attractive ("comfort and image"); and, perhaps, most important, is a place to meet other people ("sociability"). An actively used, thriving public plaza is much safer, in the long run, than an empty one.

Learn more about the projects at [padowntown.org/resource\\_category/designing-for-distance](https://padowntown.org/resource_category/designing-for-distance). 



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily's passion for storytelling, healthy communities and nature-based placemaking inspires her role at PDC, where she supports the organization's marketing, communications, and membership. She also works as freelance designer, photographer and videographer and has received numerous awards including selections in the No Man's Land Film Festival, Filmed by Bike Oregon, and S.O.F.A. Film Festival. She resides in Dauphin, PA, where she can be found working on her next oil painting, exploring the nearby rivers and trails with her young daughter, Willow, or training for her next ultramarathon.