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Street Experiments

Urban Planning & Social Justice in Washington D.C. The Black Lives Matter Plaza

In the heart of Washington, D.C., sits a street experiment that was both a confrontational message addressed to the then-President of the United States and a unique and lasting urban design that has transformed a city street into a powerful and assertive social justice statement.

From Pandemic to Protests

Black Lives Matter Plaza is located on 16th Street, NW, in front of the White House and has become a place of community resilience and a city's response that emerged at a unique time in modern American history:

- *March 11, 2020.* The COVID-19 coronavirus, which initially broke out in China, was declared by the World Health Organization a worldwide pandemic, shutting down cities worldwide. (NFID, 2024).
- *April 2020.* City street experiments began to pop up in response to the COVID-19 restrictions in Milan, Munich, Stuttgart, and many other cities. As vehicle traffic disappeared and authorities discouraged indoor gatherings, cities began experimenting with new street installations and reimagining spaces in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhao, 2024).
- *May 26, 2020.* Following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of local police, protests against police brutality broke out in Minneapolis and other cities around the country. These protests added fuel to the Black Lives Matter movement, triggering nationwide protests and demands for change (Patel, 2020).
- *June 1, 2020.* Responding to BLM protesters, the White House ordered the U.S. Park Police and National Guard troops to use tear gas to clear nonviolent protesters between St. John's Church and Lafayette Park across from the White House. Immediately afterward, President Trump and the Attorney General walked to St. John's Church for a photo op, holding up a Bible, condemning the protestors, and declaring, "We have the greatest country in the world. Keep it nice and safe" (Nirappil, 2020).
- *June 5-6, 2020.* Responding to the violent response to the protests, Washington, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser renamed 16th Street in front of the White House to Black Lives Matter Plaza and overnight had city workers, local artists, and DC citizens paint the

slogan in massive yellow letters on the street. This act transformed the relatively quiet street north of the White House into a powerful symbol of social justice, inspiring hope, and resilience in the face of adversity (Nirappil, 2020).

The Plaza as a Community Space

For nine months following its creation in June 2020, Black Lives Matter Plaza was a pedestrian-only zone that became a central meeting point for community activism. In its quieter moments, it also became a place where locals could attend community events like yoga classes, workshops, performances, and other peaceful activities.

In March 2021, the city moved to make the Black Lives Plaza a more permanent part of the city urban landscape. Part of this involved reopening the street to traffic. What was a four-lane corridor with parking on both sides of the street became a two-lane street on either side of a central plaza (Lang, 2021). At the same time, the city invested in pedestrian and bike infrastructure, additional barriers, and improved lighting, safety, and greenery features. As a result, the Plaza is being maintained as a permanent installation. While no longer the flashpoint it was when originally created, the semi-dedicated pedestrian-only zone continues to be a vital part of the DC urban environment for DC citizens and visitors alike.

The Stakeholders

Not surprisingly, the initial creation of the Plaza did not go through any formal approval or incorporate public feedback. Rather, it was an action taken by the city's mayor that reflected the urgency and public outrage at the moment. President Trump's response to the BLM protests and the treatment of DC citizens sparked widespread anger across the majority Black and liberal city, which led to broad support and pride for the Mayor's action. While many out-of-state Republicans in Congress would like to close down the plaza, DC residents have remained strongly supportive and pushed to make the plaza a permanent installation. The Black Lives Matter Plaza's continued existence speaks out boldly for the cause of social justice and gives a voice to DC residents who lack a voice in Congress.

Lasting Impact

The Black Lives Matter Plaza is a case study of how a street experiment can integrate social justice priorities with urban planning. At its core, the plaza is no more than a two-block open space. However, the political importance of its central location and bold message have made it a center for community engagement on social change topics.

Recently, I was walking in the area and witnessed protesters (and tourists) using the space as intended. While one group was getting organized to express their political message, tourists wandered, taking selfies in the now-famous location.

Four years later, the Black Lives Matter Plaza has become more than just an open street; it is a powerful street experiment that integrates social justice with urban planning to provide a space for social change.

References

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