

SPOTS DESIGNED TO ‘PARK’ PEOPLE, NOT CARS, OUTSIDE LOCAL BUSINESSES

Metropolitan Planning Council aims to quantify economic potential of converting parking spots to ‘people spots’

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PHOTO BY STUDIO THOMAS

dSpace Studio's "The Wave," the city of Chicago's People Spot on Southport Avenue, showcases the design opportunities for architects—and increased economic potential for neighborhood merchants—by creating gathering spaces out of parking spots. "The Wave" was honored with an AIA Chicago Small Projects Award.

People Spots, a City of Chicago initiative, repurposes existing on-street parking spaces into seasonal parklets designed to “park” people instead of cars. At the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC), we’ve been promoting these types of placemaking tools in metropolitan Chicago since 2008, and we know they have a lasting positive effect on neighborhoods. To measure that impact, this summer we recorded activity at all nine People Spots on an average day, from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., and interviewed nearly 40 nearby business owners and more than 100 People Spot users. Our research found that not only have these People Spots added well-

designed, safe, comfortable places for people to rest and gather in busy urban shopping districts, but they also generate increased foot traffic and sales for local businesses, and inspire community leaders to do more.

Each People Spot is outfitted with seating and planters, which provide a barrier to the street, and all Spots are wheelchair accessible. Local businesses pay for and maintain each of the nine People Spots across the city—and the investment pays off. Some 80 percent of business owners we interviewed said they’ve experienced increased foot traffic as a result of the Spots. We counted about 450 people per

day using the spots—not a bad tradeoff for 16 parking spaces! Some business owners reported up to a 20 percent increase in sales. A whopping 93 percent said the feeling of the street is more positive since the People Spot opened.

Their comments were equally telling. They said, “It makes people comfortable,” “Gives a better sense of community,” “Gives us a better image,” “It’s attractive,” “Makes the street look cleaner” and that “No question it has enhanced the pedestrian experience.”

When asked if the People Spot drove businesses to invest more, Heather Way Kitzes, executive director of the Lakeview Chamber of

Commerce, found that building two People Spots (Lincoln Avenue and the AIA Chicago Small Project Awards-winning “The Wave” on Southport Avenue) had even broader impact.

“They prompted us to look and reevaluate all that we were doing ... to up our game in other places,” says Kitzes. Business owners take pride in the Spots. Francisco Fourcade, owner of Osteria Pizza Metro, finds it valuable to keep the People Spot directly in front of his business “looking sharp and clean.” Michael Salvatore, owner of Heritage Bicycles, which faces the People Spot on Lincoln Avenue, soon realized people “would look directly at my storefront, so I invested in subway tiles on the front of the store so it would look nice.” Salvatore calls the Spot “Instagram Heaven” which also helps to promote his business on social media.

While maintaining a People Spot requires some effort, Francis Lee, owner of De Rice in Bronzeville, found that the time he put into the People Spot was certainly worth it because

“people do pay more attention” to his restaurant and they “feel safer and more comfortable with the Spot being there.”

Many business owners found the People Spots encouraged pedestrians to slow down and take a fresh look at the shopping and dining opportunities in their neighborhoods. Maria Rodriguez, owner of El Nuevo Mexicano in Lakeview, said, “The People Spot has called more attention to our restaurant. The bright colors, the artwork and plantings have made Clark Street a lot cozier in front of my restaurant.” Dane Redaway, manager of the Akira clothing store in Andersonville, finds the Spot outside his store to be “like a town square” that’s better for business because “people sit and stare at the storefront windows.”

Maureen Martino, executive director of Lakeview East Chamber of Commerce, saw the potential to use the Spots to activate a stretch of Clark Street that needed a boost in foot traffic. Not only is a People Spot perceived as a way to

increase pedestrian traffic, but many respondents said it helps make the street feel safer because it extends the sidewalk.

Thoughtful design of each of Chicago’s nine People Spots has created what many survey participants called an “an urban oasis” within the bustle of street activity. The challenge in the design is to convert a parking space into a park that is safe, aesthetically pleasing, removable for the winter and affordable for the business district. That’s no small feat, but neighborhoods across the city have demonstrated that it is a worthwhile endeavor that has brought more people—who are spending more money—into the neighborhood businesses.

The study results demonstrate the power of returning a small amount of street space to people. **CA**



FOR A VIDEO ABOUT THE PEOPLE SPOTS and more information on MPC’s research and results, visit METROPLANNING.ORG/PEOPLESPOTS.