

A vibrant street scene in Midtown Atlanta, featuring a mix of modern and historic architecture. The street is filled with people, some sitting at outdoor tables under white tents, and others walking. Colorful bird-shaped decorations are strung across the street. The scene is lively and community-oriented.

Midtown Atlanta Public Life Action Plan

Gehl **MIDTOWN**
Alliance

Executive Summary — 2023

Executive Summary

This is a pivotal moment for Midtown as it emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic and navigates changing relationships with urban living and working. **A people-first Midtown is key to tackling this challenge.**

Midtown has long valued the public realm as core to its identity, dating from the original Blueprint Midtown Master Plan in the late 1990s. “Public life” is the shared experience of the city created by people as they live their lives outside of their homes, workplaces and cars. Fostering and celebrating public life — by improving and activating public spaces, enlivening the ground floor and retail experience, and ensuring human-friendly streets are all key to the long-term success and resilience of Midtown.

Midtown Alliance engaged Gehl to put its ‘public life lens’ on Midtown and take a fresh look at its current reality and opportunities. The process of creating this action plan included a broad array of field observations, measurement, benchmarking and feedback. This six-month effort was guided by a multidisciplinary Steering Committee,

consisting of Midtown property owners, major institutions, higher education, arts and cultural attractions, residents, employers, real estate professionals, mobility professionals, city leadership and civic enthusiasts. The Steering Committee assembled working groups to tackle specific focus areas, such as strengthening ground-floor retail; programming and activation and leveraging activity centers. The contents of this report are the product of this work, with an action plan that prioritizes actionable strategies for the district’s future and public life.

This report clocks in at over 140 pages, with the case for public life, an analysis of existing conditions, the action plan and an appendix with toolkits. **This is solid work and we encourage you to read it all, but if we had to distill it into eight takeaways, they are as follows.**



1 **Too often, Midtown’s ground floor experience lacks the energy and vibrancy one would expect from a district with its fundamental strengths.**

With Midtown’s success in attracting new investment, its anchor institutions, unparalleled walkability, transit and cultural vitality, Midtown has all the ingredients of the best urban districts. But the street at eye level can be lackluster. Midtown’s energy and momentum must be more visible on the street.

2 **Investing in public life and public space is a competitive differentiator and the key to sustained success in Midtown.** With the emergence of other activity centers in the city and the region that offer enticing destinations, Midtown risks undermining its potential by

offering little to workers and residents when they step outside their buildings. Continued success as a location-of-choice means Midtown must do more to cultivate everyday vibrancy and activity at street level.

3 **Making significant improvements to public life doesn’t have to break the bank.** It’s cheap to be sweet to people. Small moves like a strategically placed mobile food and beverage cart, a live musical performance, or a unique retailer can go a long way in stimulating spikes in activity and delight. Strategies that take longer or cost more are still important, but near-term pilot projects and experimentation are key to learning, improving and building momentum for longer-term change.

4

People who spend time in Midtown are demanding more and better invitations to public life. From the 2022 Midtown Community Survey that garnered almost 4,000 responses by people who work, live, and spend time in Midtown, 89% want more publicly accessible open spaces, with amenities and invitations to sit, visit, work, buy food and drink, or enjoy live music in Midtown. 98% want an improved environment for walking, and 83% for cycling. When we provide these invitations, people flock to them. We need a lot more.

5

Active building edges and retail storefronts are essential to vibrant public life. But business as usual won't get us there. Retail storefronts make up only 3% of real estate in Midtown but they play a huge role in defining Midtown's street-level character. Without active ground floor retail that satisfies customer needs, we'll end up with a lot of tall buildings with little activity at the street, while people travel outside the district to shop. With its growing residential base and spending power, Midtown's current retail mix is punching well below its weight. With 60+ different retail owners and more than 360 retail spaces in Midtown, greater coordination and cooperation among clusters of retail owners is needed to curate a retail amenity mix, lower the barrier to entry for choice tenants and build critical mass. We need more examples of successful street-level retail to attract more high-quality retailers.

6

We should start by building on existing areas of strength and prioritizing efforts. The core of Midtown is 1.2 square miles and 122 blocks. We are not going to get very far by focusing on everywhere all at once. Peachtree Street is the spine of Midtown and should be an initial focus, including forging stronger connections from Peachtree Street to the East and West to other clusters of activity and character areas in the district. As noted in this report, quick wins will help build momentum for longer term success.

7

We need to rebalance Midtown's mobility equation to create more human-friendly streets. People who spend time in Midtown overwhelmingly favor walking (98%), biking (82%) and transit (89%) over cars (50%). It doesn't matter if you live here, work here or own property here, these responses are consistent and have been for 10+ years of Midtown Community Surveys. But the current design of Midtown streets puts cars first, and getting more cars through Midtown as quickly as possible is not success, nor is it what our community wants. With the support of the Midtown Improvement District, Midtown Alliance has been pursuing an ambitious transportation work program of mobility, access and safety enhancements. Repurposing just 8% of Midtown's lane-miles into protected multimodal lanes, as well as other interventions like signals and safer crossings will make a huge difference. We also need to get these projects on the ground much faster.

8

How do we supercharge public life? The answer is YOU. Midtown Alliance alone can't get us there. They are scrappy and they work hard but there is much they can't control or even substantially influence. They don't own property, they have no regulatory or approval powers, and they don't have the staff and resources to accomplish what is needed for a district of this size and scale — currently drawing an average of more than 75,000 people a day. And we all know that implementation isn't going to happen because we put this beautiful 140-page report on a website.

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Public life will happen because we make it happen. All of us. Whether you're a property owner, small business, large employer or someone who lives here, works here, goes to school here or otherwise spends time here, you must determine that this is worthy of your time, efforts and resources. So, please read on!

