The role that streets play in society has rapidly evolved since the COVID-19 pandemic began. In some aspects streets are returning to their earliest roots, supporting not only transportation needs but also economic, social, recreation and public health needs of our communities. This changing role has required many communities and agencies to adapt their thinking and their tools.

Fortunately, there’s already an approach that embraces these principles and optimizes the usage of public rights of way: The Complete Streets approach. Complete Streets is a design philosophy that aims to promote equity and balance among sometimes competing objectives or interests. Complete Streets are designed to support the development of more livable communities by improving access and mobility for people of all ages and abilities. In doing so they help provide a wider range of transportation options while improving the equity, safety, public health and economy of the local community. What they look like depends on the context and values of the community. A complete street in a rural community will often look different from a complete street in an urban area, but both share the common design goals to ensure the safety and comfort for all users.

As communities look for more opportunities to use their public spaces in different ways, pilot projects can help to quickly test ideas, engage stakeholders and transform spaces to meet their needs. In this Experts Talk interview, Rick Plenge and Greg Adelberg share how pilot projects can help communities achieve their goals and enhance overall livability. They offer insights on how to implement a successful project and where potential pitfalls lie.
Q. Why do agencies consider Complete Streets pilot projects in their communities?

Rick: Many communities have used them to effectively dip their toe in the water to test how transportation management ideas reflect community values and show how the public right of way can be reimagined. These endeavors, often low-risk and high-reward, provide a living lab of sorts. They allow communities to perform project-specific testing to both document the outcomes of the pilot installation and support a permanent installation.

One good example of the importance of pilot projects is the emergence of micromobility options such as scooters or e-bikes. These new travel choices have created disruptions that seemingly emerged overnight and require a new playbook. A pilot project allows for the temporary integration of new mobility options. It provides flexibility to adjust based on the impacts of the pilot, any unintended consequences and experience of stakeholders.

Gregory: Pilot projects also serve as powerful community-building tools, putting the community at the heart of the design process by allowing for more meaningful engagement. The ability to interact with the proposed changes and experience the physical transformation and its benefits provides for a greater understanding of the project and often more community support prior to permanently installing. Their inherent flexibility helps stimulate the transformation of spaces while moving toward a community’s long-term vision.

Streets make up more than 80% of all public space in many cities. They are the heart of our public space network and are among the most critical urban infrastructure. Pilot projects can allow communities, often with limited resources, to respond and adapt to the constant demands and changes through low-cost rapid installations.
Q. COVID-19 has sparked a renewed interest in rethinking the role of streets. How have communities used pilot projects to respond to current needs?

Rick: The 2020 pandemic has required communities to rethink the role that streets and public spaces can play in supporting public safety, physical distancing requirements, essential worker commutes, personal well-being and the local economy. In some ways, pilot street projects have accelerated as communities have had to quickly adapt their streets and public spaces through low-cost and readily available resources including paint, cones and bollards, parklets and modular bus islands, planters and concrete barriers.

We are supporting agencies on a variety of COVID-19 response projects with the goal of quickly transforming public space to be more flexible and responsive to community pandemic response needs. One example is our work with the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority and City of Cambridge, Mass., to transform the Main Street corridor to increase physical separation between bicyclists and/or pedestrians and moving traffic while supporting improved transit operations. These types of transformations can also increase public space available for local businesses for café seating, package delivery and take out activities.

In other areas we are collaborating with local transit providers to create additional bus stop seating and finding opportunities to temporarily relocate bus stops away from congested areas such as subway access points or building entrances.

Gregory: We are also currently working with the City of Boston on their Healthy Streets initiative, a program designed to make quick changes to Boston’s streets in order to support a healthy reopening and equitable COVID-19 recovery. Using simple paint and post treatments, our design creates dramatic changes along a key transit corridor that has continued to maintain pre-pandemic ridership levels. Reliable transit access, a new connected bike route and pedestrian safety improvements will help strengthen multimodal options and reliability along the corridor while also supporting the local businesses community.

Q. What are some best practices for ensuring that Complete Street pilot projects are accessible to everyone in a community?

Rick: It is paramount that Complete Street pilots are accessible to anyone. Designers should go beyond simply meeting the minimum standards of the ADA and weave the principles of accessibility and inclusivity into every aspect of a project. One crucial step is to engage a diverse group of stakeholders during project development to ensure the design meets the needs of a broad cross section of its community. Some areas to consider during design include evaluating roadway slopes for pedestrians who use mobility aids, in addition to integrating visual and tactile wayfinding elements and detectable edges for pedestrians with visual impairments.

Communities are also realizing the importance of integrating good design principles into their pilot projects to intuitively support community safety and reduce the need for police oversight and enforcement of traffic operations. Design treatments like horizontal chicanes can naturally calm and deter through vehicular traffic, temporary traffic control devices can better delineate separated bicycle and pedestrian facilities, and informative gateway elements can effectively define street operations. All of these elements help ensure that everyone can enjoy the same level of access in a safe environment.

Gregory: We are finalizing work with the City and County of Denver on pilot streetscape improvements for Santa Fe Drive, a street that runs through the heart of Denver’s oldest art district, in a neighborhood rich in culture and creativity.

Working hand-in-hand with HDR’s ADA experts, we explored various interim design treatments to ensure users of all ages and abilities are able to fully access the new spaces. During many of our design charrettes with stakeholders and the community, our team heard loud and clear that providing additional room for people to walk and linger was integral to any interim redesign option. For example, mimicking the extension of the sidewalk in key locations with a raised decking system was vital in order to showcase the longer-term vision. Our preferred design addresses all users’ needs, allowing for complete mobility at both the roadway and sidewalk level including access to new public seating.
Q. How should pilot projects be developed to ensure a process and outcome that includes all stakeholders?

**Rick:** Based on a pilot project’s typical accelerated development and implementation schedule, it is vital to quickly identify a diverse list of project area stakeholders that represents the local community and existing and potential users of the facility. This includes using a robust pre- and post-implementation data collection effort that collects not only quantitative data sets but also qualitative data through user and community surveys. The data will help tell the story, identify necessary design tweaks and support future investments and potential permanent installations.

**Gregory:** Each community is different, and so the needs and requirements of a project must be tailored to local needs. Leaders should take particular care to engage people who have been traditionally underserved and underrepresented to make sure they are engaged at every step. Providing a range of engagement platforms is paramount and may include holding meetings at varying times of day and reaching out individually to those who have difficulty attending.

On our Santa Fe Streetscape project, we tapped into the community to help guide the design process. We worked closely with area residents, businesses, the city, community groups and local artists to develop a truly community-led design. We hosted three pop-up events in art galleries during The First Friday Art Walks and held several design charrettes with stakeholders and the Santa Fe Business Improvement District to better understand their values and priorities in both the near and long-term.

We also showcased the preliminary design in August 2019 during the largest First Friday Art Walk of the year to engage and empower the community, test out early concepts and gain a better understanding of the specific corridor needs prior to final design and installation. The trial installation allowed us to see how people interacted with the design, providing us a greater understanding of our treatments that led to several modifications that otherwise may not have occurred.

Q. What makes a Complete Streets pilot project successful?

**Rick:** Project success takes on many shapes and will appear different to communities and people based on their individual needs. The more inclusive and diverse the conversation can be during the project development phase, the greater the likelihood that a facility will be successful in appealing to a broader audience. This includes projects that appeal to physical distancing needs, safety and comfort, accessibility and inclusivity, business and economic support and recreation and commuting needs. It is important to note that these
conversations need to continue through implementation to understand how successful the project was in achieving the community values and goals. Ongoing input can be extremely important in the identification of potential design tweaks that can be made to further the success of a project and future projects.

**Gregory:** Another aspect that often contributes greatly to the overall success is the establishment of partnerships. We have worked on many projects that have started with a local Business Improvement Districts or advocacy organizations. These groups have been instrumental in initiating the conversation and increasing awareness or need for action. In one recent project along the West Colfax Corridor in Denver we served on a panel of experts made up of City and County of Denver, Colorado Department of Transportation and mobility advocacy organizations to help identify the corridor challenges and potential solutions. From those first conversations, the local BID funded the development and implementation of a conceptual design and pilot implementation. This investment and successful outcome of the pilot led to development of final design plans that were facilitated through a contract with the City and County of Denver.

Q. **What role will pilot projects have in the future reprogramming of our streets?**

**Rick:** The ability to continually experiment with our streets and public realm and identify opportunities to adapt them to societal needs is truly remarkable. The evolution of pilots and supporting design reference materials has broadened community awareness of the role that streets play in society and the opportunities to enhance them. Budget constraints, ubiquitous in all communities, present an opportunity to use pilot projects to help garner community support and ensure that limited resources are directed to projects that reflect local community values.

**Gregory:** Pilot projects are a means to an end: providing the physical changes necessary to improve lives of community residents. While this incremental approach has its role and place, interim or temporary designs cannot replace both the immediate and long-lasting benefits that are produced with the full reconstruction of a street. Pilot projects serve as one step in the evolution of the redesign of a street and, given their low cost, will continue to serve as the go-to for communities seeking to rapidly respond to ever-changing societal needs and test new concepts with limited initial investment.
Inspiration & Advice

Q. What advice do you have for someone just starting to work in the field?

Rick: This is a truly revolutionary time to be in the Complete Streets and multi-modal field. The amount of change that has occurred over the last 15 years and continues daily is staggering. That evolution starts with the constant need of communities and agencies to grow and adapt to help improve the quality of life for everyone. This presents tremendous opportunity for industry professionals that have a passion for improving communities to help continue to push the envelope. Also keeping an open mind and willingness to experiment with innovative ideas is vital to continue this accelerated growth.

Gregory: Soak up as much information as you can from as many people and places as possible, and never be afraid to push boundaries. For me, it all comes back to the desire, and really the need, to travel and explore the world. Seeing how other communities approach life and the design of their respective cities and public spaces not only inspires but provides continually new insights and perspectives that feed my work and designs. Explore and learn to see and understand the various components that make a space successful.

Q. How did you become interested in Complete Streets?

Rick: It happened organically through a combination of elements. I am an avid cyclist and have long recognized the role that infrastructure played in my family’s comfort and enjoyment riding within a city or region. Second, my spouse’s job transfer 15 years ago led to me taking a role with the Chicago Department of Transportation which coincided with a major industry shift to a more Complete Streets approach. I was able to support the city’s adoption and integration of this Complete Streets approach through a variety of multi-modal safety and operational focused projects. Through the use of the city’s in-house construction resources, it was fulfilling to see the immediate positive impacts that were realized through a variety of pilot projects and ultimately led to their permanent installation. This accelerated project implementation, along with direct feedback from area stakeholders, helped me realize the importance that these street transformations were playing in improving the quality of life of residents and visitors alike.

Gregory: I often joke that if I didn’t have to earn a living, I would spend the bulk of my days simply traveling and walking around exploring neighborhoods. My passion for urban life and all its culturally rich offerings and excitement started at an early age. I went to high school in a Chicago neighborhood rich in culture and diversity. My friends and I would often hop on the ‘L’ trains and go explore Chicago’s distinct neighborhoods. Fast forward to later in life, I moved back to the city after college and started working on Complete Streets projects for the Chicago Transit Authority, Chicago Department of Transportation and other agencies in the Chicago metropolitan area just when the field really started to gain traction. It was and still is a great feeling knowing that I was involved in the wave of change right as it really started to take shape.