

Streets Are For Everything with Kay Cheng

📅 Thu, 1/6 12:30PM ⌚ 28:30

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

street, city, space, pandemic, tactical urbanism, programming, spin, san francisco, projects, public spaces, public realm, neighborhood, build, mobility, ideas, community, people, local, project, festival

SPEAKERS

Greg Lindsay, Kay Cheng



Greg Lindsay 00:24

Hello, and welcome to threesixtyCITY by NewCities, a podcast delving into the future of urban life. I'm your host, Greg Lindsey. Early in the pandemic, public officials around the world seize streets from cars to create urgently needed outdoor space for recreation. Cities such as Paris, Milan and Madrid led the way towards what some hoped would be a 15 minute city, lived locally on foot or by bicycle, but actually implementing this aspiration proved more complicated than originally expected. After all, we can't all live in the center of Paris. But how are cities pursuing this vision grappling with the issues of equity and financing it, and what does the street of the future actually look like beyond plywood street furniture, and hastily painted bicycle lanes. Today, we're joined by Kay Cheng, Spin's head of policy and a former planner in San Francisco and New York who's been working on these projects for nearly a decade, and is now in charge of implementing the micro-mobility company's investments in placemaking, and nd partnering with cities to reimagine the public realm. Thanks for joining us, Kay.



Kay Cheng 01:21

Thanks for having me. Happy to be here.



Greg Lindsay 01:23

Well, I want to go back a bit before we discuss your current work, to the first time I became familiar with your thinking in this area. And that was in 2015, in San Francisco, at the the Market Street Prototyping Festival. It was a weekend long celebration of custom built street furniture, I remember, there was pinball machines and gardens, all sorts of things, where teams of architects had littered Market Street away with all kinds of new street furniture. And to me it was remarkable, because it was the first time in thinking beyond just benches or the things we associate with streets. It really tried to push the limits of what the street could be. I want to start by asking, what inspired that? And what inspired your work in the public sector, first, in

terms of how do we think about streets. Placemaking is both very old, least more than a decade, from Project for Public Spaces. But it feels like a lot of the potential hasn't yet been realized. So, I'm curious how you got inspired and how you're pursuing that at Spin now today?

K

Kay Cheng 02:18

Yeah, thanks for the call back to Market Street Prototyping Festival, it was definitely a culmination of efforts of the program I was running in San Francisco. So it's called Groundplay. It's all about tactical urbanism, building off the momentum of the creation of parklets, which was coined in San Francisco, and was the evolution of parking day to parklets. So extending that to a whole entire festival, and then creating enough momentum to start a really large scale infrastructure project like redesigning Market Street. So how can these iterative placemaking, short term installations, translate into impacting these long term infrastructure projects? So that was the idea behind the prototyping festival. There was a previous one, that Gray Area Foundation for the Arts had done on a smaller scale and we had got inspired by that. And, of course, we partnered with the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, so artists were at the forefront of how we reimagine what our streets should be like. The ethos was really that public spaces are about the ideas and aspirations of the public themselves. And not us telling them what the street should be, but really inviting that creative commons to display out in the public realm. And then, of course, the draw to streets and why we focus a lot on that is, it makes up 25% of land area in San Francisco, and most urban areas, where it's all this latent, kind of untapped space that could be better utilized. So lots of literature and groups working in this space, but I was happy to be a part of that small movement in San Francisco.

G

Greg Lindsay 04:31

Great, before coming to your work at Spin, and how you've carried that forward in the private sector. Since you mentioned tactical urbanism, I wanted to ask, how did the prototyping festival fit into the longer term redevelopment of Market Street? It always struck me that there's a gap between tactical urbanism, which of course is very short term, very iterative, and the deeper strategy. It seems like there's a missing middle when it comes to fully realizing those projects. And so I'm curious, did you succeed in bridging that gap and what lessons can other cities learn about how to translate their tactical urbanism experiments into longer term change, because that's really the moment we're in right now.

K

Kay Cheng 05:06

It's like stakeholder engagement, but from the internal side. So who are the decision makers that will ultimately adopt these more responsive, creative public space installations that we envisioned. Like Stuarts Public Works and MTA, right, so you have to make sure that they're on board from the beginning. So I think the internal stakeholder alignment and buy in from the beginning is helpful. We had them along the way, they gave us a permit for it. I think there's just so many politics at play in SF. We did make the case, we did a pretty robust evaluation of how many more kids were around, and how many more people are lingering if you invite people to stay instead of taking away all the benches. There's a general understanding that we want our sidewalks and our public spaces to be more vibrant. There was some success in that, it's still being played out, it's such a long trajectory. Like most things, it's iterative. We did the

festival two years in a row. We tried to incubate some of them. So we work with Gray Area to say, what are the most successful prototypes that were here for a weekend? Can they be there a little bit longer for a month or even six months? If these installations change every few months, is that better than designing something that we think will be there for 20 years? So that's the kind of investigating work we were doing and thinking about how even the micro neighborhoods and areas change along a boulevard like Market Street. So those are all lessons learned that helped us understand how to bring these things to have a longer life. It all boils down to maintenance and liability, which is not very sexy.

G

Greg Lindsay 07:15

Maintenance, I say blessed be the maintainers. I mean, I love that trope that maintenance is the key to this. But liability, that's a whole other kettle of fish. I want to move on to your pre-pandemic work for Spin, because even before the pandemic priorities carried over some of your experiments then to Spin, because I recall when Spin partnered with Better Block, which is the Dallas-based other progenitor of tactical urbanism, to start creating parklets. So what happened when you crossed over to the private sector, in terms of what you were able to do with Spin and partner with cities to create some of these next generation versions of this? What was your inspiration there?

K

Kay Cheng 07:47

Well, it was just a continuation of what I had started and everything I learned about maintenance and liability, and how to engage local communities to be a part of this work. I like to think of it as the three pronged approach, you have government, of course, and then you have private sector, and then you have the local advocates and community residents. So if you get the right partnerships, as like the triangle that I always try to achieve in any of the projects we do. Bringing that model forward is really what I tried to replicate. By bringing those three groups together, you get more creative ideas, we're all working towards the same goals, but then not really having the project to coalesce around. Whether that's an intersection, and starting small to build those relationships and trust, helps to grease the wheels for that. In Denver, we had a parklet competition with Better Block, which was really fun. So similar to prototyping festival, inviting public, private, advocates to come out and say what they think should be on their streets. The goal behind the Denver competition was there wasn't a parking day, or there was but it kind of lost steam, and then they'd hadn't had parklets there before. So we strategically picked that. And it was a success. Some of them got to stay a little bit longer and then we had an overall parking day. So scooting around to all those different parklets was really fun. And then similar to some of the other work that we had done at Groundplay, looking at plazas, and intersections, and crosswalk treatments. We did that in Salt Lake City. That has a fun trajectory as well. So one of the first projects we did, which was a weekend demonstration, the paint and everything got to stay for a while but then just this year, they made it permanent. So a couple years later putting down permanent paint and seeing that evolution has been really rewarding.

G

Greg Lindsay 10:06

Could you talk a bit about some of the features of these evolved parklets, because I remember the Better Block crew were using advanced wood milling techniques to build things that were

approaching structures. I've seen some of your other work in the UK, the results of these beautiful sculptural elements. Aesthetically and functionally, how have you pushed the parklet forward? Because a lot of them are still fairly basic seating and parking spaces. There's a certain aesthetic to it, but your work is slightly different than that. It seems much more permanent, much more sculptural, and not just hastily assembled plywood. So where do you see the evolution of it going from an aesthetic sense? And also, in terms of functions added to it, things parklets can do versus just having a coffee or parking a bike?

K

Kay Cheng 10:50

The recipe goes back to reflect what the community wants there. So the baseline is, it has to be structurally sound, the platform should be at grade with the sidewalk or pavement, making it easier for people to cross over to that place. Is it shade that people want? Is there a performance space? As much as you can bring in the local community is great. So the longest parklet in London that we did was great. There was a local florist nearby. So they said, Oh, we want this kind of greenwall, green roof action. We wouldn't have come up with that if that business wasn't there across from a market. And, they had a lot of patrons that wanted to hang out there and do different events. So all of that was taking notes from what the local community wanted. And then just trying to find local design builders that have a lot of passion, and invite them to their space. So the person we had there was, Yes Make, and I was introduced to them from Better Block. So it's a small, even global community in this space. So he took reclaimed timber from nearby forests and brought that there and, yeah, it was a really nice project. Overall, we changed our attitude from temporary tactical, to removable, so less about removable/responsive towards designing something that feels intentional. Not just traffic barricades and whatnot, but so that people feel like it's a nice space that they want to be in. But also making it removable if needed, having that flexibility versus having it feel just temporary.

G

Greg Lindsay 12:54

Well, that brings us forward then in time to the pandemic itself, which of course, as I mentioned at the outset, cities around the world, particularly in Europe, that had these plans for aggressive conversion of streets into avenues for micro mobility used the crisis to move forward on those plans. The 15-minute city, which came from Paris, at NewCities we call it proximity city, because depending on who you talk to, it should be a 30-, 20-, 15-, 5-, 2- or the one-minute city if you're in Sweden. But one of the things that struck me, and this is why I was interested in your work in particular, beyond simply adding bike lanes, there's often a lot of discussion about what the public realm should look like. Or how we would build out these spaces or what kind of new functions would be added. And so I'm curious when the pandemic happened, how did your work change with regards to parklets? And we'll also discuss the equity and safety issues as well. Suddenly, we saw cities around the world trying to cordon off space, and not even knowing what to do. And I'm curious how you see that evolution, what they've learned what they're building, how should we think of the street in the future beyond simply closing it to traffic?

K

Kay Cheng 14:05

Great question. Yeah, we had this whole vision pre-pandemic, we were visiting Kansas City, we

great question. Yeah, we had this whole vision pre-pandemic, we were visiting Kansas City, we we're gonna build all these parklets, we we're gonna do all this stuff. And then COVID hit and we were like, how are we going to do all these projects from our laptops? We still really wanted to be a part of what's happening in the streets knowing that people need to be out there, and need that socially distance space. So we pivoted to pretty much funding a lot of slow streets, like open streets, that kind of stuff. In Kansas City, we ended up pivoting to a different project. They had their main streets figured out, but they didn't have open streets figured out at the neighborhood level. So we worked with Better Block to create a kit of parts that neighborhoods could sign up for, customize, and bring it to their neighborhood to close down their street. So we funded a bunch of little things like that. I think it really depends on, like you said, how ready the city was or in what phase of evolution they were. So in Portland, for example, they had lots of great examples of that already. They had a really beefed up their Healthy Streets initiative. And for that project, we had been talking to some people at Folk's cooking up different types of projects. Since pandemic hit, how can we be a part of Healthy Streets while all this other racial injustice stuff is bubbling up. So we thought, although the program is available to all businesses, who can really afford to be a part of that? Even if the permit is free, you still need to buy these barriers, you still need to create some sort of parklet structure, how do you even start? So we worked with PBOT, a local design build fabricator, to sponsor three BIPOC businesses that wanted to be a part of Healthy Streets and build out their parklet. But I think it really comes down to, again, being responsive to what the local neighborhood or business district or school community need or want? The all star example that we sponsored was in New York on 34th Ave. They were just doing amazing programming, and we thought, how can we be a part of that? Talking to the organizers, again, the cities are saying, you're allowed to be in this space, but then talking to those people who are the day to day stewards of that space to keep it vibrant, and ongoing, was very eye opening for me. So adding to maintenance and liability, I'll add programming as like the third thing that is challenging in trying to scale these types of streets in a long term way. So programming, maintenance, liability. I believe that you can kind of get the money to make it look good, or get the permit to let you have it. But then how do you make it really flourish over time. So I think supporting local folks who are doing this programming to keep that up. Little things like when it starts getting darker earlier, women don't feel comfortable at night, so wanting to add more lighting, or getting more volunteers doubling up in pairs. All these little nuanced things, to keep that success. If we can be a part of that, that's really great. Because knowing the government side, it's really hard to do one off little mini grants to each little street or organization that is trying to do more programming. But for us, we're able to be more agile with that. So with our funding, they're able to do like ESL classes and double their Zumba classes and have scooter rides and all that stuff. So yeah, it's been a wild ride.

G

Greg Lindsay 18:28

That's amazing. And by 34th Avenue in New York City, you mean particularly in Jackson Heights, which is my old neighborhood. But there is a great question there when you talk about programming. One of the things I wanted to ask you, going back to your work at San Francisco or how private companies might help. Justin Garrett Moore, the architect, has proposed that cities create a department of care. Public Project for Public Spaces has talked about the city having a department for street management. And at one point I believe Ford, which owns Spin and Gehl partners, had worked at one point to develop a theoretical Street Ranger program for the United States. I'm curious, how should cities think about this? Is there ways for private companies like Spin or philanthropies to invest in creating a role, someone who is the

community manager for public streets? I've always been taken with the idea, but is there a way to implement that? How could we think about having local custodians or even city employees as custodians of certain neighborhoods to oversee public life and not just infrastructure?

K

Kay Cheng 19:45

Definitely. I think it's definitely needed. Departments that are on the edge of that but then keep within their boundaries are parks department. So they kind of have that already. So if you had that same model, but for the street public spaces, you're already there. They have mobile rock climbing walls, or they have different things in the way that they program parks. And then there's also a model of how private companies can come and sponsor for example a Fourth of July Picnic Day, and have it be a public open event. So I think parks have been more traditionally in that space and have lots of foundations that help with that. So I think just broadening that perspective a little bit bigger to open streets areas would make a lot of sense. I know in San Francisco, the Sanchez Open Street folks, they have been thinking about how all the open streets folks can band together and fight for the policies they want and support that they need. That kind of coalition building will eventually result in reduced challenges. So maybe you need someone to come clean your street, more than DPW could do once a month or something like that, so you band all together, and you figure out a contract for that. So I think definitely having that type of skill support is useful. I still think that having the programming come from a local champion really helps. I don't know if you are aware of this project. It's not a street project, but it was taking over a public school site that was no longer a school. So it's called Francis Scott Key Playland, and we hired a local community person to be the steward of that space. So, should we have yoga for elderly folks, do we have storytime? They just know the ins and outs of who's coming to the spaces and what they would need, and not making it super complicated. Because I think, as planners, and I've done this, we like to program what's ideal for us. But if it doesn't resonate with the people, it doesn't matter. There ended up being a lot of kids wanting to skate, so it ended up being a skate park destination, which really makes a difference in the long term success of a space. And the cost is not the problem. I think it's just that creative fine tuning. And then to your other question about private partnership, I think that is something that cities are grappling with. When I was talking to Vancouver, who are thinking about how to scale their open streets. That place that cities are in right now, where we have these streateries and all these successful things. They're now asking what things should stay and what things should we upgrade to the next level of permanency of not just have traffic control devices? And how can a private sector be a part of that? And I think that cities don't really have that understanding of what the value is and how do we not privatize it, but then also benefit from those dollars? I would say, probably the best lesson learned was when working with the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, they have that recipe figured out. Here's your menu, are you going to be this level sponsor, or this level sponsor, or this level? Let's work backwards to how much money we need to supplement whatever grants or city funds that we have. Set that out for the year and then open up those opportunities, because I think those private dollars are there, they just don't really know where to go. And they don't know that those opportunities are there. So definitely having a position or two in each city would definitely help with that effort.

G

Greg Lindsay 24:00

Great. Well, I'd love to know how you are putting some of these ideas into practice in some of greater Ford projects. One obviously is the Michigan Central Depot in Detroit, which is of

course, the focus of a big Ford effort to transform Corktown, the neighborhood. I know they're working with New Lab and others to bring in all sorts of solutions. So I'm curious how your work plays into that and also in Pittsburgh, the Spin Mobility Hubs that finally got off the ground, where Karina Rick's at the city has been trying for a long time, because state law hampered it. But finally thinking through what new multimodal hubs can look like. How are these two projects proceeding? And how do you see them as a template to expand upon some of these ideas?

K

Kay Cheng 24:41

Yeah, I'm really excited about both of those. There's a whole Michigan Central team with all sorts of interesting programming. And we've just been on the periphery of that. There's some streets that they're taking on from the city. So those are opportunities to have a long term canvas to test out new ideas that the community would want. Whether it's better barriers, which we've dabbled with, but we're still finding the right partners to test that out. But having a set street, or couple of streets, that we could test out new ideas would be really great. And then building those relationships with local communities to say, this is what we want, we'd like to close down their street, or we'd like to have barriers with planters, or we'd like to have all sorts of different things. Working through that kind of living innovation zone, if you will, would be really great. So we've been talking to them about that. And of course, we have our standard mobility hubs. We have scooters that can be charged and how does it all fit together? It's a good, tight relationship with city, private, and community, which I feel will be nice to see how that all plays out. One project we did, was the City One Challenge, I'm not sure if you're familiar with that one. One of the awardees was a local youth group that came up with a mobility hub idea. So we had a bunch of different private/public partnerships to help that get off the ground. And they had their ideas, like we want to have somewhere to sit, we want to have local murals on it. We also want scooters there. So we built out a temporary version of that. So it'd be really great to take that to the next level once Michigan Central's coming to its first phase of implementation. Pittsburgh wise, we were super excited about that. We tried to do a whole Parking Day this year, and they were kind of doing their own thing. So I was happy to see that take off, but love to take that to the next level too, in terms of talking to a couple of other local advocacy groups about which corridors they're most interested in and bringing it to the next level, whether it's two way cycle track with different types of parking along the way. So that's definitely in the works, and hopefully it can get off the ground and be implemented next year.

G

Greg Lindsay 27:31

Absolutely. Well, thank you so much for joining us, Kay. It's been a real pleasure to have you on this week's episode. Thank you all, as always, for listening. And we'll be back next week with another episode of threesixtyCITY.