Brooklyn Receives First DOT Sanctioned “Pop-Up” Cafe
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Summer light shines down on Brooklyn's first Pop-up Cafe.

At Pattern Cities we like to observe how good ideas spread.

A few years ago, New York City began implementing a slew of tactical urbanism “pilot” projects that add public space and improve street safety. By making quick, low cost improvements using temporary and/or inexpensive materials, the City was able to swiftly make the improvements and monitor their success. Many of these projects are now on their way to becoming permanent, like the transformation of Broadway, which is perhaps the most well-known example. Today, more than 50 such projects are on their way to replacing car space with people space all over this great city.

Seeing the wisdom of this deliberate, low-cost approach, city officials in San Francisco developed their own “Pavement to Parks” program, which makes use of the same tactics to achieve the same results: more public space, safer streets.

San Francisco’s Pavement to Parks projects are inspired by the recent success of similar projects in New York City – where plazas and seating areas have been created in excess roadway simply by painting or treating the asphalt, placing protective barriers along the
periphery, and installing moveable tables and chairs. Streets such as Broadway have been transformed into much more inviting and pedestrian-friendly spaces through New York’s efforts.

However, rather than directly mimic NYC’s approach, the San Francisco quickly began riffing on the idea, with their much heralded “parklets,” which replace one or two automobile parking spaces with raised wooden platforms, tables, chairs, and planters.

Not to be outdone, NYC took the cue and has since added their own “pop-up” cafes, which are typically placed in front of restaurants where sidewalk widths preclude outdoor sidewalk seating. While the seats are open to restaurant patrons and non-patrons alike, intelligent business owners surely see the benefit to making space for people to linger in front of their establishments. Since last fall, several pop-up cafes have been built in Manhattan, adding much needed places to sit and enjoy the City’s wonderful street life. However, it was not until this past Friday that Brooklyn received its own example, at Smith and Warren Streets in the borough’s lively Cobble Hill neighborhood. Associated with the Ecopolis Cafe, the DOT has further leveraged a previous investment in pedestrian curb extensions by providing this additional public space amenity.

While snapping photos at rush hour, I was able to witness dozens of people noticing the pop-up cafe for the first time—particularly those exiting the subway who probably didn’t notice the cafe on their way to work that morning.