

Spatial sciences student maps NYC's successful move to outdoor dining

May 7 2021, by Meredith McGroarty



Credit: University of Southern California

When New York City announced it would be greatly expanding outdoor dining in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, questions abounded. How was a city clogged with cars and buses, where the sidewalks are too narrow for people to carry unfurled umbrellas, going to suddenly

accommodate thousands of tables and chairs in its preciously limited outdoor space?

Very successfully, it turned out. By cutting off some streets to car traffic and capitalizing on more limited late-night and weekend bus routes, the [city](#) was able to secure more outside dining space for more than 10,300 restaurants through its (now permanent) Open Restaurants program. That move outdoors signals how restaurants in other [high-density](#), space-limited cities might be able to modify their dining spaces to prevent [disease transmission](#), says Alexa Weintraub, a junior majoring in geodesign at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

"I think there's a lot of potential for restaurants to continue expanding and coming up with innovative ideas for outdoor dining in the future," she adds.

For the final project of her "Geospatial Technology Management for Sustainability Science and Sustainable Development" (SSCI 402) course, Weintraub used geographic information sciences (GIS) tools to create a [StoryMap](#)— an interactive web map with elements such as text, video or images—that analyzed how New York's bus routes were affected by Open Restaurants and its companion program [Open Streets: Restaurants](#). Through these programs, several neighboring eating establishments apply as a group to have a whole street closed to vehicle traffic, freeing up additional street space for tables and chairs. Weintraub's map, "Eating on the Streets: A New Pandemic Lifestyle," analyzed [restaurant](#) and transportation data to display other potential locations for Open Streets restaurants throughout New York's five boroughs.

Weintraub's work also landed her a spot as one of 10 finalists in the student category of the [2020 ArcGIS StoryMaps Competition for Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), sponsored by GIS technology company Esri and the United Nations Sustainable Development

Solutions Network.

"Alexa's project was very current and practical. People are thinking about making dining on the [street](#) a permanent solution even after the pandemic is over, but nobody has looked in depth at how are we going to do it, and where," said Leilei Duan, a lecturer with the Spatial Sciences Institute who teaches the SSCI 402 course.

Sustainable design

Duan's course focused closely on the UN's 17 SDGs, which range from eliminating poverty to ocean conservation. Weintraub's map was tied to SDG 8, which calls for decent work and economic growth, important considerations in New York, where restaurants are a major source of both income and employment. Although her project addressed one industry in one city, it has broader lessons for sustainability and city planning, Duan says.

"The framework and methodology Alexa used can be used in L.A., as well," she says. "And she's not just thinking about how we're going to help small businesses get back on track, but beyond this, to the question, "Once we get out of COVID, how will we change our previous habits?"

Changing habits doesn't have to be unpleasant, Weintraub says. Open dining is not only good for restaurants and tax coffers; it provides diners with a different way of interacting with their town.

"Being able to sit outside, you can be more intertwined into the city while also dining at anywhere from a five-star restaurant to a quick place to grab a bite to eat," Weintraub says.

New York made its Open Restaurants program permanent. Whether L.A. decides to follow suit with its equally rich and geographically more

complex restaurant scene remains to be seen.

Provided by University of Southern California

Citation: Spatial sciences student maps NYC's successful move to outdoor dining (2021, May 7)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://techxplore.com/news/2021-05-spatial-sciences-student-nyc-successful.html>

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