

# Permanent change in the concrete jungle

Blog post by Practice Lead Tom King, 9 October 2020

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New York City occupies a space like no other in the modern Western mind. Its liminal status, halfway between imagination and reality, has been entrenched through decades of cultural saturation. Coming to the city for the first time, you feel you have already been there; its sights and sounds are already familiar, a composite of scenes from half-remembered TV shows and films.

Back in March I wrote of the eerie stillness of the place as the covid-19 lockdown took hold: [‘the city that never sleeps is in a coma.’](#) Since then, Gotham has emerged from that slumber to a new clamour, gripped by the Black Lives Matter protests which continue, albeit less consistently, to the present day. I saw first-hand the clashes between protesters and police, including witnessing [NYPD vehicles driving into crowds](#); just because New York is the bluest of ‘blue states’ didn’t make the confrontation any less violent. Days after returning in September the grand jury decision not to charge the officers who shot and killed Breonna Taylor sparked another [enormous march](#).

In a contrast to London’s hectic Eat Out to Help Out scheme, which brought droves of people back into restaurants, often dining indoors, NYC only opened up for indoor dining last week. Through a successful testing program and this abundance of caution, the summer has seen very low covid-19 caseloads. That caution has come at a very high cost.

A [report published last week](#) by the Office of the New York State Comptroller estimates that employment in the city’s restaurant industry dropped from 315,000 in February to just 174,000 in August - only a very modest recovery from the low of 91,000 reached in April. Estimates of restaurant and bar closures range widely, but numbers in excess of 1,200 are widely referenced. The report bears this out, saying that in the next 6-12 months, up to 50% of the city’s eateries could close permanently.

Both the city mayor and the state governor have made moves to protect the restaurant industry. Chief among them has been Mayor Bill de Blasio’s ‘Open Restaurants’ program which allowed restaurants to expand outdoor seating into roads and to the frontages of adjacent properties. This has proven extremely popular, and in late September the city announced that it would be made [permanent](#). Restaurants must now consider how to incorporate heating elements and tent enclosures to keep diners warm into the cooler autumn, and what can often be bitter Manhattan winters.

The transformation of the city’s streets is highly visible, and ironically makes social distancing on sidewalks much more difficult. But taking issue with that seems churlish in view of the obvious benefits the outdoor dining program has brought to proprietors, workers and customers alike. More than that, it has brought new and positive aesthetic, auditory and olfactory sensations to a city traditionally dominated by the roar of the combustion engine, the vivid yellow of its taxis, and - yes - the distinctive staleness of garbage.

Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo have re-joined the battle on whether and when the city should shut down neighbourhoods where the caseload is rising. It is unlikely that this permanent change to the city’s streets will continue unaltered through a difficult winter, especially if there is freezing weather and abundant snowfall.

But for a city whose allure is built upon its relationship with food and drink, innovations are clearly to be embraced. This iconic metropolis, built on a grid system that venerates car usage, is reclaiming its roads and streets for human use. If you can make these changes here, you can make them anywhere.