



HOW DO YOU DEFINE SUCCESS? MEASURING THE OUTCOMES OF THE KING ST PILOT PROJECT

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In early December, City of Toronto staff recommended an extension to the King Street Pilot Project until the end of July 2019. The announcement served as a spark to reignite a passionate debate that surrounds this City experiment. Since the King Street Pilot Project's inception, arguments have been expressed from opposing spectrums: "yes" it is working and it should be permanent to "no" it is not working and it should be scrapped. Oddly, both sides cite "the data" as proof of success or failure.

One year later, neither side is in a position to declare victory. Considerable data has been amassed over the course of the Pilot Project. Some evidence suggests a noticeable reduction in travel times; whereas contrasting reports suggest negligible changes in travel times. According to some reports, local businesses are suffering. Other metrics reveal no change in credit card transactions for businesses within the test zone relative to last year. What gives? How can the data prove both sides of the argument? It all depends on how you define and measure success. What factors are considered and what is valued most? How can the City make the most of the King Street Pilot Project extension to July 2019 to guide future urban planning decisions?

What cannot be denied are the detrimental effects of the King Street Pilot Project on the public realm - all sides appear to be in agreement. King Street business owners, residents, and visitors voice concerns about the lack of animation on a once vibrant corridor - during off commute hours it is a ghost street. To enhance the public realm, the City issued a call for applications to animate King Street.

If the public realm interventions work will it be easier to identify success? Before the launch, the City may have been best served to conduct a user experience and design research study with the engagement of local stakeholders, working together to define criteria for success. Stakeholder engagement with transit riders, local residents, city staff, local businesses, event hosts, and hotel operators (among others) would have given each of the invested parties a platform to declare their top priorities, shape the vision the King Street corridor and define guiding principles and success criteria for the King Street Pilot Project.



It is conceivable that conflicting barometers of success would be defined by such a diverse stakeholder group; however, the engagement would inevitably have revealed cross cutting priorities. This common denominator could serve as the highest valued determinants of success and therefore influence the urban planning strategy for King Street and the adjacent areas.

With success now being identified, the next task would have been to develop a methodology on how to evaluate and measure it. A research and user experience study would include techniques like naturalistic observation, key informant interviews, custom design surveys and impact assessments. These methods would be used to compare outcomes of greatest importance before, during and after the Pilot Project.

Any publicly funded intervention of this size in the built environment would benefit from the inclusion of user experience research and impact evaluation. In the case of the King Street Pilot Project, the opportunity to focus on a set of predetermined indicators of success and systematically compare activity before and after its implementation could have eliminated the current “it’s working” “it’s not working” debate. Maybe we could name other projects we know that are about to start or already have begun in Toronto that would benefit from this type of research - maybe even just more broadly suggesting builds like university campuses.

Toronto is a city of neighbourhoods. The area encompassing the King Street Pilot Project is more than a financial district where commuters are transported in, out and through. It is a neighbourhood with many residential buildings and permits for even more, a thriving hub of social activity with restaurants, theatres and public areas that host numerous cultural events. These are factors that drive visitors, residents and businesses to the lively King Street.

An undeniable consequence of the King Street Pilot Project is a renewed interest in urban design. Increased density will be a driving factor to initiate further transformation of the downtown core. The importance of the public realm cannot be overlooked, we must avoid a repeat of what happened on King Street Community building and urban planning decisions reflect much more than commute times and ridership numbers. The public realm is an expression of who we are as Torontonians and a beacon to what makes this city so culturally important and the envy of many. We are more than numbers and travel times. We are people - the heartbeat of a city.