



Advised By: Heather Fitz Gibbon

Department of Urban Studies

The Implementation of Public Spaces:

A Case Study into Changes Being Made Ahead of the 2026 NFL Draft in Pittsburgh

Caleb B. Greenwald



Abstract

Public spaces are an immensely important feature in urban life. However, there appears to be a lack of public spaces in the United States when compared to cities in other countries. This study researches the possible reasons behind this by investigating the implementation of public spaces in America. A literature review of domestic and global projects was completed to get a better understanding of these places. An investigation into Sherri Arnstein and Henri Lefebvre's theories on how public involvement shapes communities was done, as well as looking at theories related to the "Not in My Backyard" mentality. Through a case study, I focus on new public space projects in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania ahead of the 2026 NFL draft. The case study examines Pittsburgh's current economic state, a recent history of public space projects in the city, and most importantly the changes being made ahead of the draft. The findings suggest that without the NFL draft these projects would likely never have been approved, highlighting the role that mega events play in.



Findings

1. New Plans

Five days after it was announced that Pittsburgh would be hosting the 2026 NFL draft, PA governor Josh Shapiro announced a new 600-million-dollar plan to revitalize downtown. The plans include numerous different mixed-use development projects, and they include the renovation of three public spaces downtown. The public space projects are renovating Point State Park, Market Square, as well as creating the 8th Street Block Civic Space.

2. Problems With Public Space Implementation

From interviews and news sources I was able to produce a list of the main problems with public space implementation. Problems included issues with money, politics, local community pushback, Covid-19, and red tape issues. I also saw no involvement from the local community in the planning process.

3. All for the Draft

The 2026 NFL Draft triggered a burst of public investment, however the motivation was spectacle, not long-term community benefit. Projects prioritized downtown image for the draft. All three of my interview participants said something along the line of expressing doubt that all of these projects would be happening without the draft.

What are the key barriers to public space implementation in the US, and does public participation, along with mega events shape that?



Intro

- **Public Spaces-** An area that is accessible to all and include various types of amenities, an area immensely important to city life.
- Numerous benefits include creating communities, positive effect on Quality of Life, positive impacts on children health, reduced presence of violence, and positive impact on local housing markets.
- **Pittsburgh-** Currently has a metro population of 1.7 million. Has seen an increase in recent years after decades of decline.
- Has experienced a major loss of business in the CBD
- **NFL Draft-** The key event in the leagues offseason. Hosted in New York City for 50 years, since 2015 it has been traveling to various league cities.
- Detroit, MI, hosted the draft in 2024. The city brought in a reported 213 million dollars to go along with another 775,000 people.
- Described to me as the biggest event that Pittsburgh could host.



Sources

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Theory



Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

Highlights the importance for citizen participation on local projects. Breaks it up into an eight part ladder. Findings show minimal involvement on the ladder.

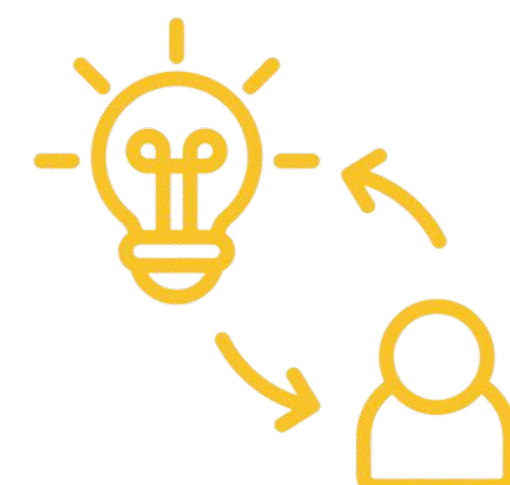
Lefebvre's Right to the City

Highlights the human right it is to shape their cities. Findings showed plans based around businesses, rather than the people.

Eranti's NIMBY Framework

Explained opposition to some public space features as **value-based**, not just selfish—concerns ranged from property value to local identity.

Methods



This project used a **qualitative case study** based om Pittsburgh, focused on public space development tied to the 2026 NFL Draft.

Data Collection:

- **Interviews** with planners, city officials, and cultural leaders leading the new public space projects.
- **Public records** from city council, redevelopment authorities, and zoning boards
- **Media analysis** of local and national coverage, mainly in newspapers