

Columbus Avenue's ugly duckling grows up green

Local BID-led effort adds trees, lights, plantings and even a solar trash compactor.



New trees have been planted between West 76th and West 77th streets.

Photo: Columbus Avenue BID

The high-rent stretch of Columbus Avenue between West 67th and West 82nd streets boasts a bustling, nearly seamless wall of commerce. Tony stationery stores share the boulevard with upscale clothing boutiques and popular dessert destinations like the Pinkberry yogurt shop and Magnolia Bakery.

The sole exception is a gaping hole: the block between West 76th and West 77th streets, where there is not a single shop or restaurant along the entire western side. Instead, a high chain-link fence separates the sidewalk from the asphalt playground of William J. O'Shea Junior High.

"That school just had the ugliest fence around it for years, and it was the only thing along Columbus Avenue that didn't fit with the rest of the neighborhood," said Randy Garutti, chief executive of Shake Shack, which has a branch across from the playground—and offending barrier—on West 77th Street. "We're big proponents of the neighborhood, and we've been talking about the right plan for that block for years."

Tree-peat

Finally, that plan has taken shape. On May 13, the Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District cut the ribbon on what it trumpets as the Upper West Side's first fully sustainable streetscape, transforming the ugly duckling of the Upper West Side into one of its greenest stretches.

The block now features three young holly trees and three young white oaks, and the tree pits for the five existing trees have been widened to 10 feet and surrounded by new guards. There also are Manhattan's first bioswale, a sloped plant bed designed to capture storm-water runoff; six new metal CityBenches; solar-powered lights embedded in the sidewalk; and a solar trash compactor capable of packing in seven times as much garbage as a standard bin, a sanitation amenity provided by Shake Shack.

"There's a whole suite of city [greening] initiatives that, when woven together, are greater than the sum of their parts," said Nette Compton, director of green infrastructure for the city's Department of Parks & Recreation. "Larger tree pits give birth to healthier trees and greater canopy cover, which make it more pleasant to sit on the new benches."

She also noted that plantings along the sides of roads have been shown to make drivers less likely to speed, and that the bioswale will add to the groundwater, making the plants less likely to need care.

"There's a synergy by having them all placed together," Ms. Compton said.

Of course, pulling all that off required the help of a trio of city agencies. The Parks Department consulted on the Columbus Avenue project and provided some of the necessary permits for expanding tree pits and plantings. It also chipped in the three oaks (the city typically doesn't plant hollies and, therefore, couldn't provide any). The Department of Transportation provided and installed the new benches and designed the street treatment, while the Department of Environmental Protection approved the bioswale.

But it was the business improvement district that paid for the project. The \$100,000 in funding was raised through the New Taste of the Upper West Side food festival, said BID Executive Director Barbara Adler. "We've been trying for years to make it more attractive and vital," Ms. Adler said. "This block has been a barren nothing for too long."

The color of money

Local business owners are thrilled with the new look, which they said will bring more foot traffic to the area. "I love the improvements," said Steve Hanson, owner of Isabella's restaurant, whose windows and outdoor tables look onto the area. "They exceeded everyone's expectations and are a beautiful amenity to the street."

Now Upper West Side business leaders and elected officials are hoping the fully rigged-out block serves as an example for greening streets across the five boroughs. Some of the elements are already on the march.

Assemblywoman Linda Rosenthal, who represents the neighborhood, has procured a capital grant from the state to add solar trash bins down Columbus Avenue.

"The big-belly solar trash complex can really be a model for the rest of the city," Ms. Rosenthal said, noting that the grant would likely be between \$100,000 and \$200,000, depending on the project's scope.

"People have taken it upon themselves to do this in their own lives, and now it's being mirrored in urban design," Ms. Rosenthal said. "That block is much more enjoyable now, and it begins an important conversation about how we can make sustainable neighborhoods."

The offending chain-link fence, meanwhile, still stands. But with all the new green on the ground, suddenly no one seems to notice.

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\$100K—Cost of the sustainable street project

185—Businesses in the 15-block Columbus Avenue BID

1,870—Gallons of storm water each bioswale can absorb