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Commodity Traders and Hedge Funds Make Billions While Prices Rise for Everyone Else

Javier Blas @JavierBlas More stories by Javier Blas

14-18 Minuten

In early May, ITV, a television channel in the United Kingdom, [showed](#) a video of Alan Benson, a wheelchair user, navigating his way through London's buzzing Soho neighborhood. "I've been locked away for 420 days, so today is our first time out," says Benson.

But Benson and his wife, Yvonne, soon hit a snag: The narrow sidewalks of Soho had gone through [a pedestrian-centric makeover](#) since the pandemic. The bars and restaurants that had claimed sidewalk space left little room for Benson, who was forced to find a curb-cut. The next street had a path between tables, but a patron was blocking it with his seat. Some restaurants had roped off public sidewalks, forcing him and his wife onto the street. There he found that some devices meant to block cars, like spike strips, also blocked him. After a few failed attempts, Benson decided to head home. "I feel really excluded," he said to the camera.

Others joined the fray. A video of Katie Pennick, a campaigner at Transport for All, an accessibility advocacy organization which Benson chairs, [went viral](#) after she was seen trying to

maneuver her wheelchair between a lamppost and a chair, also in Soho. Another, of [Dr. Amy Kavanagh](#), a visually impaired activist, showed her guide dog, Ava, [being blocked](#) by a waiter while trying to negotiate a London sidewalk. Meanwhile, in New York City, Penelopo Richards, a writer with cerebral palsy, [wrote in Eater this week](#) about her challenges getting around the city's restaurants: "Plenty of outdoor dining setups act as sidewalk obstacle courses."

Fun fact about me: I use a 'teenagers' wheelchair. It's tiny. 23inches wide.

If I'm struggling to get through these "gaps", they are completely impassable for most wheelchair users and visually impaired people with dogs.

Pavements must be kept clear enough for pedestrians.

pic.twitter.com/ey0bQawdAr

— Katie Pennick (@KatiePennick) [May 3, 2021](#)

Similar stories have been playing out in [Washington, D.C.](#), [San Francisco](#), and other cities where eating, shopping and other activities [moved outdoors](#) during the pandemic. Navigating commercial stretches packed of stateries, parklets and other Covid adaptations has often exacerbated the existing challenges faced by wheelchair users and others with mobility impairments. The shift has created yet another hurdle in cities for disabled users to overcome, the latest chapter of [an ongoing battle](#) over how streets are envisioned and designed. Just this month, a [class action lawsuit](#) was filed against the city of Baltimore for not installing and maintaining curb ramps and sidewalks.

For pandemic-era parklets, which were conceived as ways to carve out more space for people, there's a tragic irony in

this role they are playing in widening the accessibility gap. And as many of these street changes are being made permanent, advocates are fighting to ensure that that space is expanded equitably.

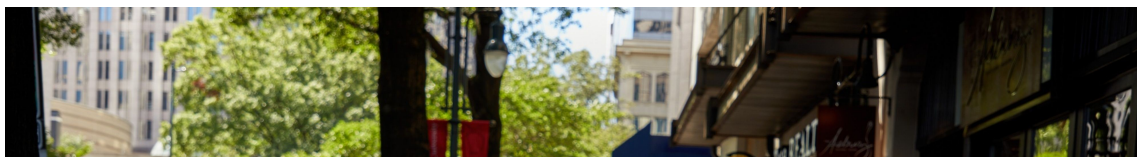
“We want to go out — we want to join in,” said Benson, when I spoke with him over the phone later that month. “We want to be part of the solution. We absolutely do not want to spoil anyone’s fun, or stop these restaurants from making money. The last year has been dreadful for everybody, so we all need to get out. But it needs to be a constructive engagement, not an enemy engagement.”

The cost of lost business

I grew up with a disabled parent; before my family went out to eat, we’d call the restaurant and ask a series of questions: Was there a ramp? (Steps were difficult for my mother.) Where were the bathrooms? (Downstairs didn’t help.) How spaced out were the tables? (Wide enough for a wheelchair?) The options quickly thinned.

Eman Rimawi, an [organizer](#) for New York Lawyers for the Public Interest who focuses on issues of transit accessibility, knows this process well. If she’s invited to meet friends somewhere, Rimawi, who uses a walker for her prosthetic legs, searches photos and customer testimonials online. Afterwards, if the experience is positive, she lets others know on Google. If it’s not — a ramp was too steep, the entrance too tight — she’s equally as vocal.

These day, the task has just grown in scope.





A sidewalk in Charlotte, North Carolina, is closed to make room for a restaurant's outdoor dining space.

Photographer: Logan Cyrus/Bloomberg

When I met Rimawi in Midtown Manhattan, she was waiting outside a restaurant she recently had an issue with. The eatery is located underneath scaffolding, and so when it places movable chairs and tables out on the sidewalk, it forces passersby to contend with metal bars or grates, which many wheelchair users cannot pass due to the gaps. If patrons have luggage — typical in Midtown — it's even more challenging.

“It's like, ‘I know you're enjoying your dinner, but you're in a public space, and I'm just trying to pass through,’” Rimawi said.

[Open Restaurants](#), the city's program to systematically allow restaurants to flip parking spots into dining parklets — 8,550 now [and counting](#) — has solved some issues, she said, but created others. The program does not relieve businesses of their obligations to comply with the accessibility requirements of the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#); designated dining structures should have ramps and room for wheelchair seating, and must leave eight-foot-wide paths for pedestrians on the sidewalk. But in practice, such requirements are often unmet. The program

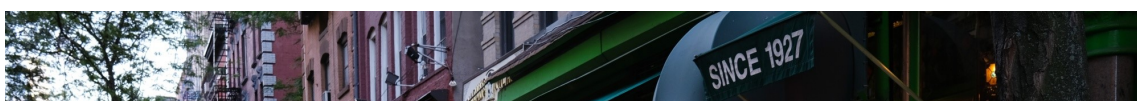
has also made some restaurants [think any piece of asphalt is free game](#), she argued. (The restaurant above had an outdoor structure in addition to sidewalk furniture.)

A corner restaurant, for example, had plastic igloo-like enclosures, a common pandemic-era sighting. As we made our way down the block, Rimawi had to let another person pass a few times, because she couldn't fit through what remained of the sidewalk space. Then you had your usual suspects: car-blocked crosswalks, outdated curb-cuts, short crossing lights. By the end of our walk, Rimawi was panting.

A disabled friend of hers, she said, experienced a similar setting at a restaurant she frequented for years, and asked the owner if they could change it. The additions were too costly — a [common refrain](#) from business owners — and so the owner politely declined. “Now she can't go there because her wheelchair won't fit,” said Rimawi. “Then they lose her business. It's a lose-lose all around. I don't think people really think about that.”

Disability advocates in the United Kingdom have a term for this: [the “Purple Pound.”](#) A campaign from a disability advocacy group estimates that businesses lose out on 2 billion pounds a month because of failing to meet the needs of disabled people.

Now vaccinated, Rimawi wondered aloud which restaurants she could physically return to as New York lurches to normalcy. But it's not just eating — it's going to the bank, seeing her siblings, attending work functions; all of it relies on whether she can get around. “I just want to live my life,” she said. “But it makes it really hard for me when I have to basically Tetris myself into things, just to make it work.”





Sidewalk brunch in New York City in 2020. Many of the city’s “Open Restaurants” street changes are being made permanent.

Photographer: Spencer Platt/Getty Images North America

To help her, the city has to be more proactive, she argued: Rather than lean on punitive fines, emphasize the potential revenue gains. On streets with extensive outdoor dining — now [made permanent](#) by City Hall — planners should analyze where sidewalks can safely be expanded. The parking-spot parklets, she said, open up the possibility of converting even more street space to pedestrian usage.

“I think if we can devise ways to utilize the space we have, we can make it work,” Rimawi said. “People forget that even though people are doing their own thing, we’re still a giant community. We just have to talk to each other.”

Design for all kinds of users

Where [accessibility intersects with urban planning](#), you’ll likely hear about the “normative user.” For centuries, cities were sculpted by non-disabled planners, who formalized their lived experience into practice. (The same concept can be lent to

criticisms that cities tend to overlook or diminish [the needs of women](#) or [non-white residents](#).) The normative user was someone without disabilities, and thus the city was built to serve them. Those with disabilities, the “abnormal” user, were left out.

In the neighborhood where Susan Dooha lives in New York, she says she sees a number of businesses violating the ADA and other human rights laws. Wires for heat lamps or outdoor lights cause tripping hazards on sidewalks for those with visual impairments, while cluttered sidewalks force wheelchair users onto the roadbed, where they have to contend with cyclists and drivers.

But most cities, says Dooha, a lawyer and executive director of [the Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York](#), do not have “ADA police” on patrol. While enforcement is necessary, she says, new initiatives need an educational component as well, such as visual reminders that show what an accessible space should look like, and why not adhering to it adversely impacts everyone. (The Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities does have [a primer](#), but whether restaurants are following it is a different story.)

Coupling education and enforcement, Dooha adds, could help unravel prevailing notions held by the public. “What we really want is a change in behavior,” she said, “so that these businesses who could have people with disabilities as customers can attract them, without making the sidewalks and the curb cuts dangerous places.”

Blowing up the perception of what a “typical” patron looks like for companies and governments is Sarah Rennie’s job as an accessibility and inclusion specialist and trainer in the U.K. city of Birmingham. On Twitter, she recently [dedicated](#) a thread to

explaining why picnic tables fall short for those who use wheelchairs, like herself. But the conversation could apply to older people, parents with strollers, or temporarily disabled patrons as well.

“To me, it was a great example of how this traditional design obviously worked a long time ago, because nobody intended it to work for everybody,” she told me. “And now it’s really unhelpful that this design is still with us. I think it’s quite symbolic that it is, really.” (She suggests that businesses get tables of all shapes and sizes, ideally with contrasting colors.)

For Rennie, awareness should be woven into every part of the planning process.

When a business is granted a license by a local municipality to expand outdoors, it should come with a “mini equality impact assessment”—a process evoked by the U.K.’s Equality Act, its ADA equivalent—to notify the owner of its duty to provide “reasonable adjustments” for accessibility issues, Rennie said. Cities could enforce a three-strike system, so the burden isn’t on disabled users to complain.

Access officer positions at local councils were [significantly cut](#) after the 2008 recession, but Rennie hopes that a renewed interest in pedestrianization will lead to rehiring. “We just need sensible inclusive design,” she said, “with paid professionals who are knowledgeable and experts in this.”

Making room at the table

Like Benson, Rennie has mostly been at home for a little over a year now.

That is the case, she explained, for many individuals in the disabled community, given their vulnerabilities to the virus. So

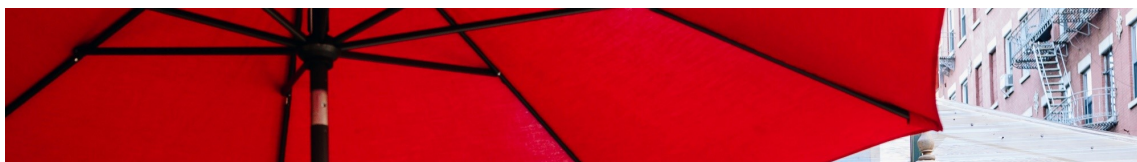
new pedestrianization efforts hatched in the last year were largely seen through a screen. “Starting to go back out the last few weeks, it’s been quite jarring to see environments you’re familiar with now changing, whether that’s pavement cafes, or parklets,” she said.

When the Birmingham City Council proposed its outdoor dining scheme last year, it invited [Access Birmingham](#), where Rennie is a vice chair, to review the licenses, she said. Her group added substantive feedback, including, for instance, the relocation of a parking spot for the disabled. It was moved to the bottom of a hill at first; Rennie’s group made sure that didn’t happen.

But generally, she said, they were willing to compromise. “I think we understood the situation for the community, that there were going to be hiccups along the way. We had to find a way to get through these next few months,” she told me. “But the worry now is that these temporary solutions [will be made] permanent without a review.”

Like [Open Streets](#), pandemic-era parklets are moving beyond experimentation and becoming full-fledged fixtures of urban streetscapes. It’s time cities get serious about how these are going to function for everyone going forward, advocates say.

Having those with appropriate lived experiences at the quite literal table seems like a given. When we met up, Rimawi suggested that cities like New York could give a stipend to disabled residents to test out new dining structures citywide, in what would be a death knell to the normative user concept. Or perhaps rank structures on their accessibility, like the city’s [letter grades for cleanliness](#).





A restaurant in New York's Little Italy neighborhood in May. As the city reopens and traffic thickens, competition for sidewalk and street space will only increase.

Photographer: Nina Westervelt/Bloomberg

Some of those ideas are being put into practice. Alfresco NYC, a [new initiative](#) from the Regional Plan Association, Tri-State Transportation Campaign and Design Trust for Public Space that will recognize high-quality Open Restaurants and Open Streets with rewards, has made accessibility part of its grading criteria. Rimawi will sit on the steering committee as an accessibility advocate.

“Fundamentally, the programs have been one of the shining lights in a pretty dark time in our region’s history,” said Kate Slevin, a senior vice president at RPA. “As these programs have expanded, there hasn’t been as much city funding and support to make them really permanent, accessible and equitable. We’re hoping to advance that.”

For Alan Benson, all of these efforts amount to more than just addressing inconveniences. They’re about visibility.

When we spoke, he told me about a conversation he had

recently with someone who tried to meet up with friends at a pub but couldn't, citing accessibility issues. "He ended up apologizing to them like it was his fault," he said.

His friend wasn't the first he heard to voice that sentiment. "It's not that you go out one day, and can't go to one place," he said. "It's the fact that it's day after day, week after week. It just grinds you down. People give up... It stops being something that is done to you, and if you're not careful, you can internalize it."

Inclusion, Benson says, means allowing everyone to participate in urban society, so everyone else notices. If a space isn't accessible, that's one less place where the concepts of "normal" are visibly challenged. The ideas borne out of the pandemic, he said, could offer an immense opportunity to change that. It could be more space — for everyone.

"The way that we overcome stigma, the way we overcome barriers, is to be seen and be out there. We overcome these things by normalizing our presence," Benson said. "If we're excluded from that, then the stigma, the isolation, becomes self-sustaining in a vicious circle."