

Downtown Promotion Reporter

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Free evening Sunset Salsa lessons enliven public space at Chelsea Triangle, encouraging participants and observers to linger in the district for dinner.

Flexible use and programming enliven public space

Free lessons in Afro-Brazilian dance, Mommy and Me Pilates and belly dancing draw participants and spectators to the Chelsea Triangle in lower Manhattan. For this innovative public space, the challenge has been to program something for everyone. Furniture at the Triangle can be arranged for conversations over coffee and informal outdoor meetings, or moved to the side to make room for large-group activities. Free lessons, offered by local studios, draw spectators as well as students.

"We wanted to do something slightly different," says Lindsey Boylan, operations manager with the Chelsea Improvement Company (CIC). "This is a trendy area with a lot of young people working in technology and media. You really have to find something new for them to be engaged. From the outset, we wanted to do things to keep people active, but something slightly different than you see in other spaces."

Boylan approaches instructors, offering them a fully set up space and signage marketing their classes, in return for free lessons at the Triangle, and at a park one block away. "It makes sense to approach someone local, or someone trying to expand their brand," she says. "Once I explained what the space was, and what the potential benefit to the studio would be, they were on board pretty quickly. We started out with just yoga, which was becoming more popular at the time. The following year, we offered yoga and Capoeira, which is very physically taxing, and a fun thing to watch that you don't see outdoors in New York. The third year, we added salsa, and that has done quite well in the Triangle, as well. It's in the evening when people are getting out of work and going for drinks and dinner."

Last year, belly dancing was added, with the CIC providing the music and skirts.

"One thing that is important about the programs we do is that they only work in public spaces if you make it really convenient for people," says Boylan. "We have the yoga mats and provide the sound and have it all set up for instructors so that all they have to do is show up." Boylan says that being in charge of set-up also provides the benefit of a smooth transition before and after classes.

Other programming includes live music, art installations and, coming soon, gourmet food concession.

"We issued the RFP, and have gotten four great responses," says Ben Donsky, project manager for the CIC. "We've already met with them individually. Tomorrow we're meeting in-house to decide which of the concessionaires we're going to negotiate with. We expect to have operations in a concession space in about two months."

Boylan says the food kiosk, like all of the furniture, will be portable to keep the space flexible. "We are also continuing to develop classes," Boylan says. "It would be ideal to have different things going on at different times throughout the day that are appealing to different parts of the population."

Programming often activates the space during otherwise quiet hours, she says. In addition to the large population of young professionals, "there is a large residential market with young children, so a Mommy and Me, or Daddy and Me Pilates class is being developed for the morning hours on work days."

The CIC also makes the space available for one-time events by outside vendors.

"The sorts of events we bring to the space have a net positive benefit for the public," says Boylan. "We want to do something that will be exciting for people to see."

For example, the CIC worked with the Malaysian Tourism Board to bring a Malaysian Market to the Triangle, complete with ethnic foods, clothing, and crafts. In addition to signage in the Triangle, programming is marketed via a "cohesive program," Boylan says.

"Our director of social media attends a lot of the programs, and blogs and tweets about them, and we have a Facebook presence now, so we coordinate that with the instructors' Facebook pages. The instructors want to promote themselves, so they are out there promoting classes at the Triangle, as well."

Creating a flexible and inviting space

Movable furniture, including a dozen tables and 48 chairs, was selected to keep use of the space flexible at Chelsea Triangle. Umbrellas provide shade and a sense of enclosure. Maureen Hackett, director of horticulture for the Chelsea Improvement Company, also selected a mix of tree, evergreen and flower species that lend the space a sense of structure and canopy, and visual interest, year round. The designer says that when working with a small space, utilizing it and arranging it in certain ways becomes more important.

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