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Neighboring on a
New York City street

Photos courtesy
Project for Public Spaces

Eleven Ways to Turn a Place Around

Thirty years ago in New York City, the primary activities of a neighborhood took place in its streets—on stoops and sidewalks, next to fire hydrants and in empty lots. Very little neighboring took place in the city's parks, markets or civic spaces, because these more traditional public spaces were either in disrepair or simply not available. In cities where people still gathered, they gravitated to the historic places built prior to World War II, because the newer public spaces were either non-existent or unusable. It was a sad, deeply disturbing time, yet highly motivating for those of us seeking to effect change.

The last half of the twentieth century was a devastating time for public spaces of all kinds—from grand city parks and plazas to neighborhood greens and town squares to downtown main streets everywhere. Suburbanization drained urban areas of many of their families, and urban renewal razed much of what was left, abetted by designers focused on creating objects, and city agencies interested in advancing the narrow agendas of their departments.



Short-term activities, such as markets and booksellers, can attract people to a space and build a constituency for it.



Watch what people do, as well as what they say, when evaluating a public space.

As a result, many cherished public spaces have been destroyed while opportunities to create new ones have been fumbled. We must do a better job of learning from these mistakes, and work harder to create new spaces in the context of the dramatic changes now taking place in American cities.

But the good news is that we are making progress. Citizens, civic leaders, designers and public space managers are rediscovering the art of making public spaces, recovering lost lessons and creating new community frameworks, visions and technical strategies that enable public spaces to succeed.

The principles outlined in this article represent our view of what it takes to reverse this destructive process, to repair unsatisfactory places and create great new ones. The key to the equation is to focus on making places: cultivating constituencies for a place, learning from them,

designing to support them, and allowing the place to evolve in incremental steps that incorporate feedback and accommodate unexpected energies and opportunities. This approach, we believe, can create thriving civic and neighborhood places, whether they are streets, transit hubs, parks, plazas or libraries.

1. *The community is the expert.* The people who live or work near a place know from experience which areas are comfortable, which are dangerous and why; where children can safely walk, ride bikes or play; and where traffic moves so fast that people are discouraged from walking along or crossing a street. Unfortunately, people are rarely asked to contribute this information to the planning and design process. It's hard to imagine how much human knowledge and experience has been lost because we haven't figured out how to use it in a meaningful way, or simply haven't asked.

2. *You are creating a place—not a design.* When people describe a place they enjoy, they use words like “safe,” “fun,” “charming” and “welcoming.” These types of adjectives describe the intangible qualities of a true place—the kind of place people talk about, and return to over and over. Intangible qualities can be measured quantitatively in a variety of ways, by using existing statistics or by conducting research, although experience has shown that such measurements have their limitations. In researching more than 1,000 public spaces around the world, we have found four key qualities of successful public spaces: accessibility, activities, comfort and sociability.

The central question is what the role of design is in creating a place. From our experience, place-making requires a much broader approach than most designers use. Creating a place depends more on effective management than it does design and requires the involvement of many different disciplines because of the extremely complex issues that need to be addressed.

For example, good maintenance and effective security are important to the success of a place, and require attentive design at the outset as well as focused, ongoing management. But it is just as important for a place to be accessible by foot and by public transportation, which might require coordination with other agencies and projects.

3. *You can't do it alone.* A good public space requires more resources and expertise than any one individual or organization can offer. Partners can contribute innovative ideas, financial support or in-kind goods and services. They can help by collaborating on activities such as joint marketing, fundraising and security that are difficult to organize at the scale of a single public space. They can broaden the impact of a public space by coordinating with their own schedule for programming or improvement projects. And a strong partnership can move a project forward by giving it more political clout.

4. *They'll always say, "It can't be done."* Because government is compartmentalized and fragmented, public officials have a limited ability to deal with public spaces effectively. Every city has numerous agencies concerned with issues that impact public space, but no city has a single department or person responsible for developing and managing public places. And the professionals responsible for activities that impact public spaces—planning, traffic, transit, recreation and education, to name a few—often have larger mandates that make the creation of effective public spaces a secondary consideration. Therefore, when an idea stretches beyond the reach of an organization and an official says, “It can’t be done,” what that usually means is: “We’ve never done things that way before.”

5. *You can see a lot just by observing.* When you observe a space, you learn about how it is actually used, rather than how you think it is used, whether the place is a small neighborhood park, a bus stop or a train station used by thousands of people each day. Methodical observations enable you to quantify what would otherwise be regarded as intuition or opinion.

By watching the ways people use spaces, you can also learn a lot about what they want from a space. People will often go to extraordinary lengths to use a space in the manner that suits them best. We have seen people use waste receptacles as places to sit, to sort through their mail or even to cook clams. Actions like these clearly speak louder than words, yet they frequently confound the designers and managers of public space.

6. *Develop a vision.* A vision for a public space essentially concerns the activities that will occur there. It follows, then, that a vision for a place should be defined by people who will use it, particularly those who live and work around it, rather than professionals or public agencies.

Every community has numerous people whose ideas can contribute to a vision for a place, if they



New ideas for Baltimore's City Hall plaza are tested.

are asked. Professionals can help bring forth these ideas by asking people to think about other places they have been to and enjoyed, and talking with them about the activities that occur in those places and the physical elements that support them. Pictures of successful spaces (and even unsuccessful ones) are a good way of eliciting more discussion about the activities (or lack thereof) in a space, and they can help illustrate physical elements, character, types of management and so forth.

7. *Form supports function.* Although design is a critical ingredient in creating public spaces, the most successful spaces grow out of an understanding of how the community will use the space. Drawing on the talents and vision of the community does not have to mean foregoing a strong design statement. If a designer pays attention to the activities or uses that space should or could support, it will greatly contribute to the strength of the project.

The reality is that in most cases, it is not until after a space is built that much thought is given to how people will use it. In fact, a good deal of retrofitting goes on in failed public spaces simply because the function was never seriously considered at the outset. In this respect, we believe that the designer, by following and incorporating the needs articulated by the community, can ultimately make the design of the space more attractive, more interesting to look at and be in because it will be used.

8. *Triangulate.* Triangulation means locating elements in a way that greatly increases the chances of activity occurring around them, so that the use of each builds off the other. For example, a bench, a trash receptacle and a telephone placed near each other at a bus stop create synergy because together, they offer more chances for activity than if they were isolated from each other. Or, if a children's reading room in a new library were located next to a playground in a park

with a food kiosk, more activity would occur than if these facilities were sited separately.

9. *Start with the petunias.* Placemaking requires more than long-term planning and large-scale changes. Many great plans become bogged down because they are too big, cost too much and take too long to happen. Short-term actions, like planting flowers, can be a way of not only testing ideas, but also giving people confidence that change is occurring and that their ideas matter.

For example, we were working in a downtown park that needed a complete capital restoration to restore its vitality. Since this would be an expensive, long-term campaign, a preliminary step was to set up a book market in small tent structures around the park's perimeter. This experiment gave confidence to the organization managing the park's restoration and demonstrated that retail uses would draw people and animate the park. When the park was finally reconstructed several years later, other types of retail uses were included in its management plan.

Good public spaces don't happen overnight and people don't have all the answers at the outset. The key is to provide for flexibility—to grow the space by experimenting, evaluating and incorporating the lessons into the next steps.

10. *Money is not the issue.* All too often, the lack of money is used as an excuse for doing nothing. In fact, we'd venture to say that too much money might discourage the inventiveness, creativity and persistence required to create a great place. When money is the issue, this is generally an indication that the wrong concept is at work, not because the plans are too expensive, but because the public doesn't feel like the place belongs to them.

11. *You are never finished.* We estimate that about eighty percent of the success of any public space can be attributed to its management. No matter how good the design of a space is, it will never become a true place unless it is cared for well.



Experiments help determine how a public space will work after it is redesigned. Traffic officials plan for the narrowing of a park road in Portland, Maine. Courtesy City of Portland

Management is critical because good places are not static; they change daily, weekly and seasonally. Given the certainty of change and the fluid nature in the use of a place at different times, the challenge is to develop the ability to respond effectively, and a good management structure will provide that flexibility.

— Fred I. Kent, Andrew G. Schwartz

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This article is synopsized from *How To Turn a Place Around* (New York: Project for Public Spaces, 2000).