

Creating “Places” that Work

by Kathleen Madden

Today, there is more and more discussion about the importance of “places.” Travel books are devoted to the best “places” in different cities, states, and parts of the world. Other books have re-introduced us to the importance of the “places” where we go just to hang out or stroll when we’re not at home or working – or shopping! Many books say that we are losing our “sense of place” and that we need to work very hard to get them back if our communities are to become more livable.

Design magazines give awards to projects that they consider the best public space designs. Yet rarely do these award-winning designs turn out to be good “places.” Somehow the discussions about the loss of places and the reality of



People are drawn to interesting activities, as here along the waterfront in Victoria, B.C.



being able to create them have not come together in any meaningful way.

From our experience, placemaking requires a radically different approach than is used by most designers today. In contrast to the traditional design or planning process, a place-oriented approach is necessarily broader than one that is primarily design driven.

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 obviously important but so is good access by foot and public transportation. Amenities such as comfortable seating, well located waste receptacles, effective signage, bathrooms, opportunities to buy food etc. are all important qualities of successful places. And it is beyond the experience of any one profession to deal with all of

these issues.

If the new mission is to “create a successful well-used place” then the role of the professionals, including the design professional, is as a resource for communities. They should work to implement the community’s vision.

The sooner the community becomes involved in the planning process the better – ideally before any planning has been done. And people should be encouraged

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PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES

Though located along a stretch of the Pacific Coast Highway, this small park in Laguna Beach, California, has loads of activities, food, and places to sit. It is a busy, healthy gathering place.



Steps to Take:

Meet with community representatives from both public and private sectors to identify the range of issues that the various groups face regarding a particular place.

- Formulate hypotheses about issues that merit further data collection and develop a Workplan for how to collect this information.
- Collect the data that you need to better understand the situation.
- Analyze data, review community input, and identify potential ideas for implementation.
- Conduct a public forum for community representatives and interested members of the larger community at which you present issues, get feedback and develop, with the community, a vision for the space.
- Translate the results of the meetings and the observations into an outline of issues and a conceptual plan that reflects the community's vision.
- Refine and discuss these recommendations with the community.
- Develop an implementation strategy.
- Develop design ideas that reflect the vision and the implementation strategy.

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to stay involved throughout the improvement effort so that they become owners or stewards of the place as it evolves. Tapping into the ideas and talents of the community is crucial in deciding what will be done to improve an existing place, or in developing a vision for a new place.

"The community" is anyone who has an interest or stake in a particular place. It is made up of the people who live near a particular place (whether they use it or not), own businesses or work in the area, or attend institutions such as schools and churches there. It also includes elected officials who represent the area and groups that organize activities there, such as a bocce club or a merchants' association.  *Steps to Take*

TRIANGULATE

Triangulation, when used as a technique for planning public spaces, means locating elements in a way that greatly increases the chances of activity occurring around them. The idea is to situate 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, or the entrance to a market or park, create synergy because there are more chances for activity than if the element were isolated. Another example: If a children's reading room in a new library is located adjacent to a playground in a park with a food kiosk, more activity will occur than if these facilities were sited separately.

Sometimes triangulation occurs spontaneously, for example, on a busy urban street corner where there is something of interest – say, one of the life-size fiberglass cow sculptures painted by artists and set up on the streets of various cities as a public art project. The cows created an excuse for people who didn't know each other to talk to one another. Farmers' markets are also good places to spot examples of triangulation: You can always find perfect strangers chatting about the attributes of and recipes for everything from sweet corn to Japanese eggplants to Jersey tomatoes.

START WITH THE PETUNIAS

Placemaking is about doing more than planning. And many great plans get bogged down because they are too big, too expensive, and simply take too long to happen. Short-term actions, like

planting petunias, can be a way of not only testing ideas, but also giving people the confidence that change is occurring – that their ideas matter. In many of the most successful public spaces, short-term actions occurred at the outset and were evaluated while longer term planning was in progress.

We were working in a downtown park that needed a complete capital restoration to restore its vitality. Since this was an expensive, long-term campaign, a book market was set up 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.

John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor, told us that people who successfully lead a program of change in a corporation or organization always “look for avenues that will allow them to produce some short-term wins, some visible changes that are associated with their effort, within six or 12 months. This gives them credibility and discourages the cynics – and there are always a lot of cynics.”



A newspaper vendor draws people to public spaces.

In creating or changing a public space, small improvements help to garner support along the way to the end result. They indicate visible change and show that someone is in charge. Petunias, which are low cost and easy to plant, have an immediate visible impact. On the other hand, once planted, they must be watered and cared for. Therefore, these flowers give a clear message that someone must be looking after the space.

MONEY IS NOT THE ISSUE

All too often, lack of money is used as an excuse for doing nothing. In fact, we'd venture to say that too much money might actually discourage the inventiveness and creativity required to create a great place. In these cases, the money is usually just handed to a professional designer, who, it is supposed, “knows better.” But no one knows better about what a public space should be like than the people who are using it.

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. Four lessons about money and public spaces:

- Small-scale, inexpensive improvements can be more effective at drawing people into spaces than major big-buck projects. Inexpensive amenities such as vending carts, outdoor café tables and chairs, umbrellas, flowers, benches, or movable seating are relatively inexpensive. Such items are not generally costly when compared with the overall budget for a public space, but are often eliminated as frills, and as a result, another potential place bites the dust.
- Developing the ability to effectively manage a space is more critical to success than a large financial investment. For example, the ability to put out items such as movable furniture at a moments notice, to host a range of events, or to notice changes in the use of the space and act on them are all ways in which a continuous management presence makes

a place successful.

- If the community is a partner in the endeavor, people will come forward and naturally draw in others. These contributions are not necessarily monetary, but may come in the form of donated goods and services or volunteer labor. In neighborhoods throughout the United States, people have, above all odds, salvaged vacant lots and transformed them into significant places in their communities, and continue to gather in them and tend to them. The cost of maintaining these spaces is high in sweat equity, but not dollars.
- When the community's vision is driving a project, money follows. Projects perceived by the public as being too expensive often do not become a reality. Why? These types of projects have not evolved from a community's vision. The most successful public space projects tend to use an incremental approach in which the place grows little by little; accordingly, people become more and more invested as it grows. Once a community backs a project with its voices and its hearts, money usually follows. ♦

Kathleen Madden is Vice President of Project for Public Spaces, which she joined shortly after the organization's inception in 1975. She has had extensive experience in all aspects of PPS's work, particularly in relation to the improvement of parks, plazas, and open spaces. Madden is currently the director of PPS's Urban Parks Institute.



This article is based on material in PPS's most recent publication, How to Turn a Place Around: A Handbook for Creating Successful Public Places (written by Kathleen Madden, and edited by Andy Schwartz). The 11 principles covered in the Handbook are:

1. The community is the expert;
2. You are creating a place, not a design;
3. You can't do it alone;
4. They always say it can't be done;
5. You can see a lot just by observing;
6. Develop a vision;
7. Forms support function;
8. Triangulate;
9. Start with the petunias;
10. Money is not the issue;
11. You are never finished.

For information on ordering How to Turn a Place Around, either call: 212-620-5660, or visit the PPS web site: www.pps.org