The Public's Place

By Michael Benanov

Can the art of city-making be learned? Project in Public Spaces is giving it a try.

Winston Churchill once said, "We shape our buildings, and afterward they shape us," astutely recognizing the impact that the architecture of a civilization has upon the culture that develops within it.

I first came to appreciate the profound effect that urban design has upon people while in Fez, Morocco. After a few days of roaming its car-less, labyrinthine streets and narrow, twisting passageways, I found myself thinking and behaving differently than I do in American cities, with their wide, straight avenues and measured blocks. It felt as if my mind were molded by the maze like layout of the town—my thoughts became as non-linear as the space around me. I was in no hurry to reach a destination, content to roam aimlessly, stop for conversation, and eventually arrive where I wanted. Time itself seemed to be affected by the form of its container. The physical layout of the old *medina* (the old section of an Arab city) shapes the character of Fez by engendering street life that exudes a palpable intensity.

The spirit of a city is closely linked to the effect of its spaces upon its residents. If American cities are to be vibrant and alive, according to Churchill's equation, they must be built from that intention, employing designs that encourage vibrancy and life. At this time when many of our cities are at a crossroads, teetering between rebirth and abandonment to the suburbs, it seems that if they are to thrive, then we must pay attention to the spaces we create within them.

What is it that draws people to some places and repels them from others? Why do we choose to eat lunch, gather together, or just people-watch in certain spots? Why do we pass others by without pause? What's the difference between a vital place, such as New York's Washington Square Park or Rockefeller Center, and a dead place, such as Washington, D.C.'s Freedom Plaza or Boston's City Hall Plaza? What makes an urban public space great, imbuing a city with life?

For many of us, the answer may be as simple as the working definition of pornography—we know it when we see it. There's just something that attracts. Some places have it, others don't.

This answer isn't sufficient for Fred Kent, director of the Project for Public Spaces (PPS), a New York-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to create spaces that enliven a neighborhood or a city. They believe

the heart of a community resides in its public realm and aim to make spaces that are attractive, active, comfortable, and used.

Founded in 1975, the Project for Public Spaces is an offshoot of sociologist William H. Whyte's Street Life Project, which examined the way people use public areas and interact in urban environments. One of his conclusions: "It's hard to design a space that will not attract people. What's remarkable is how often this has been accomplished." After Kent studied with anthropologist Margaret Mead in the '60s, he met Whyte in 1970 while working on New York's Earth Day events. Their partnership inspired PPS.

A New Haven street before reconstruction. Photos by Project for Public Places.

The Project's staff of fifteen includes specialists trained in environmental design, architecture, urban planning, psychology, landscape architecture, arts administration, and information management.

For the past twenty-five years, these so-called space-therapists have worked on projects in more than 850 communities around the world. Their interdisciplinary approach employs assessment techniques such as time-lapse filming, surveys, and systematic observation to understand what Kent calls "natural human ecosystems." The research is used to intentionally put benches, trees, fountains, walls, and other components of a space where they will be most appealing.

PPS manages the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Urban Parks Institute, whose aim is to improve the quality of America's city parks, especially in underserved neighborhoods. They also run the Public Market Collaborative, which assists in the creation and rehabilitation of local markets nationwide. These include the Shreveport Public Market in Louisiana, Meadville Market House in Maryland, and Mercado La Paloma in Los Angeles. They've published a handbook entitled *Public Markets and Community Revitalization*, which details strategies for improving neighborhood life through markets.

Kent calls his work placemaking. While the Oxford-American dictionary's definition of *place* is simply, "a particular part of space or of an area on a surface," Kent's usage has a much more visceral meaning. To him, a place is an area that encourages people to come together. It is attractive, inviting, welcoming, and full of activity. An area void of life, remaining generally empty and unused, however aesthetically pleasing, doesn't qualify.

For Kent, comfort is the keyword. "If a place is comfortable, it will encourage gathering. It will draw diverse populations, sparking more frequent and meaningful interactions between people of all ages and walks of life. People will sit and tell stories, they'll be affectionate, they will touch each other."

Kent senses that the soul of a city is inextricably intertwined with this understanding of place. The way that buildings, streets, parks, shops, and restaurants are designed affects how people relate to each other. This, more than anything, determines the character of a metropolis. "The soul of place occurs when a space takes on a personality," Kent says. "It's not about its physical, but its human, qualities." Kent's goal is to create spaces that invite soul into cities by promoting their humanity.

New York's Bryant Park provides a good example of the relationship between a city's spaces and its character. Until Kent and his colleague Kathy Madden went to work on it, this popular urban oasis was hardly used.

I laughed, but I was shocked by the natural impulse to create spaces that exclude, rather than invite, people to an area.

New Haven street after being redesigned with help from Project for Public Spaces.

Hidden from the street by a long wall, people rarely ventured inside and drug dealers took over.

Kent and Madden assessed the park, which included interviewing drug dealers who frequented the area. Then they got to work. Its entranceways were greatly enlarged to allow for visual access, walkways were redesigned, and New Yorkers came in. Food stands were put in the spots where drugs were sold, forcing the dealers out. Movable chairs were brought in so people could sit where they pleased. And, despite a few stolen seats, Bryant Park now flourishes with life, providing a reason for locals to congregate.

I met Kent in Phoenix, Arizona, in March, at a conference of the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), to whom the Project for Public Spaces serves as a consultant. He is an engaging, easily likable character in his mid-fifties, with slightly mussed sandy hair and a casual manner. Kent speaks bluntly about his work and the work of others. He hides nothing about what he likes and loathes about the way public places are designed and managed.

The GSA is the country's largest urban real-estate organization, responsible for overseeing all federal buildings and attached lands. It owns or leases more than 300 million square feet of property in sixteen hundred cities and towns.

Within the GSA, the Center for Urban Development and Livability (CUDL) was created in May 1999, as part of the Clinton Administration's Livability Initiatives. The center serves as a resource to the GSA, helping it participate in urban revitalization by encouraging management that make cities more appealing, including where and how to build and renovate. Kent is a mentor of sorts to its energetic, enthusiastic director, Hillary Levitt Altman.

Altman came to the conference from Washington to reach out to other GSA offices and expand her center's involvement in their projects. "If we can use our resources to make places instead of just building buildings, shouldn't we?" she asked.

Much of the drive behind Altman's stance is an idealistic one. "If the government can improve a community, neighborhood, or city, it has a responsibility to do so," she says. But she is not blind to the other benefits of creating attractive spaces. "Federal employees will be happier if they work in a more people-friendly setting. The image of government itself will be improved. The economic bottom line will be increased by raising property values and keeping buildings filled with clients. Additionally, where there is life, there is money being spent, from which the government and local businesses benefit," Altman remarked.

At the conference, Kent gave a slide presentation showing the difference between places and nonplaces to a hall full of GSA project managers. This is the way he begins most consultations, for before a group can design a place, they need to not only understand but be able to visualize what a place is, and what it is not.

"Slides can speak words, sentences, or paragraphs," Kent says, "imparting a sense of place in a way that concepts cannot. Images take people away from abstractions and into streets, parks, and plazas. They help people immediately recognize what works in a certain setting and what doesn't. In a sense, the slide show is like a mail-order catalogue of international urban design; viewers instantly see what they like and don't like, noting innovations and absurdities in already existing spaces."

The presentation demonstrated the importance of certain elements of place, such as shade, water, activities, and seating. One image showed a wall too high for most women to feel comfortable clambering atop, creating a convenient gallery where men convened to gawk at the fairer sex. Another picture showed a man perched on top of a fire hydrant, because there was nowhere else to sit. Boston's City Hall Plaza, a place Kent calls "an urban wasteland," was contrasted with the teeming Italian *piazza* it was modeled upon. The Italian version was a hub of activity, with cafés, a market atmosphere, and lots of seating—all lacking in Boston.

One of the slides spoke to the essential need for an organization like the Project for Public Spaces. It showed a small pedestrian way in Manhattan with an island of bushes running down its center. The planners, worried that passers-by would sit on the bushes, asked Kent if it would be a good idea to place metal spikes among the plants. Kent responded, "You

Perhaps planners and architects should see themselves as servants rather than experts.

could try putting benches next to the bushes instead."

I laughed, but I was shocked by the natural impulse to create spaces that exclude, rather than invite, people to an area. Why is the option to invite such a radical alternative, and what does this say about the culture from which our public spaces emerge?

One factor involved is the ever-increasing specialization of roles in our society. Kent sees a splitting taking place. "Members of a community give up their own creativity to those who have been specially trained to embody this quality—namely architects, planners, and designers. It is as if the communal psyche has invested its creative function in these professionals alone, letting it atrophy elsewhere," he says.

"The specialists who wear the robes of creativity are themselves split off from other functions of humanity," Kent says. "Creative abstractions become more important than people. The purity of designs are ends in themselves, rather than means to nurture urban life."

"Designers are more concerned with how a project looks than how it works," Kent maintains. "They are less about fitting spaces to people than they are about fitting spaces to aesthetic ideals. But you can have a beautiful space and it might not be alive."

Moreover, this over-developed, over-specialized creative function "sees itself as *expert* rather than *servant*, which has significant consequences," Kent says. An expert comes with a certain authority, a certain prestige. It is a form of nobility in today's world. And, Kent believes, the priorities of these experts are often different from those of the community. "The community, however, having deposited its collective creativity into the hands of a few, is unpracticed at determining for itself what a space should be," says Kent. "Too often the reins are handed over to experts who serve something besides the people, who feel intimidated and impotent in the face of nobility."

He believes that if planners and architects could see themselves as servants rather than experts, designs would change, moving away from a reverence for textbook ideals and toward an appreciation for humanity.

In tending to the soul of a city, reintegration of a community's split-off aspects is critical. Kent facilitates this through helping community members reclaim their creativity and by bringing the entities that compose neighborhoods into conversation and working partnerships with one another.

He gathers disparate, sometimes estranged, groups together to discuss how a place can best serve everyone. For one federal project in Fort Worth, Texas, Kent brought together the GSA, local government, the transit department, a nearby church, small businesses, and the city's residents. Designers were left out during the project's early stages.

Kent says that an attitude of humility is of utmost importance in such an undertaking. "You have to admit that you know very little, that the community knows much more. It is critical for consultants or planners to drop their assumptions about what they think a space needs and let the community determine that for itself. Inevitably the results will be better, and people will be more excited about participating as a sense of project-ownership emerges."

"They surprise themselves with their own vision and become excited at the possibilities they see," Kent says, "and they are surprised further by the willingness of various groups to come together to build toward their dreams."

Only after the community has an idea of what it wants, designers are called in. And they are invited only as servants of the collective vision.

Of course when separate interests try to make a decision together about anything, there are conflicts. So what happens when people assess a space and have different visions for its use? Kent thinks that's great. "Part of placemaking is incorporating multiple functions into one integrated design. A place with many uses has more life and attraction than a monodimensional space. Most disagreements resolve themselves as participants see that they are all striving for the same goal, and that uses need not be exclusive of one another."

The Fort Worth plan includes a performance stage, fountains, trees, benches, food vendors, coffee shops, public art, chess tables. All of these combined elements produce a far more interesting place than one reserved only for performances or chess games. The park will also host a trolley stop, creating a new downtown transit hub.

Kent believes that incorporating public transportation into urban spaces has multiple benefits. Transit stops are a natural funnel for human traffic, offering a reason and a means for people to congregate. Moreover, public transportation serves the greater purpose of place because cars are unnecessary. "Automobile-oriented environments are rarely people friendly," Kent says.

Aside from the physical unpleasantries of cars in human areas—exhaust fumes, loud motors, horns, the dead zones of concrete parking lots, and the dangers of getting run over—the automobile, Kent says, "fosters isolation from others. People move around protected by metal shells, having no cause to interact except maybe to yell at one another for blocking the way. The car is everywhere and there is no place."

Kent views the car as "a way to travel through life and not get involved in it." Paired with the television, he sees many caught in a culture of isolation, a step or more removed from others. Kent believes many of society's ills are rooted in this detachment. "Place, on the other hand, offers greater exposure to the real and the human, inviting people to leave their metal or electronic cocoons," he says.

While Kent's goal is to create great public spaces in the physical sense, part of his success is that his intent is inherent in his methods. He creates great public spaces through the conversations he facilitates by encouraging room for discussion, creative head space, "thinking outside the box," and open forums: the creation of inter- and intra-personal space in which a project can germinate and grow, and relationships between community members can do the same.

One issue around which there was much talk at the Phoenix conference was design and security. After the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, it's easy to see why. Planners now brainstorm about the best ways to keep a building and its tenants safe. Does this mean Fort Apache- style architecture? Can an area be inviting and alive and remain secure? Can the presence of people and activity actually make a place more safe? The question ultimately becomes: "How much humanity are we willing to sacrifice for security?" It has been asked, "Do we want Timothy McVeigh to be this country's most influential designer?"

Government agencies are thinking about security and design in new ways. They are also confronting the deeper issues of cultural fears and media fear-mongering, acceptance of risk as a part of life, and the proclivity of our society to place blame whenever someone gets hurt.

In many ways, this conversational and psychological space is as important to Kent as physical space. In my two days with him, hardly would a few hours pass without his mentioning "getting out of jail" in some context or another. He recoils at the voluntary confines that people and communities choose to live within. "Place draws us from the prison of isolation. Conversation does, too, and helps our imaginations move to new, uncharted territory," Kent says. Working with Altman, Kent helps the federal government break out of its traditional, often unconsidered, way of interacting with communities.

The results of this partnership are phenomenal. The Fort Worth project has received widespread support, and varied community interests have joined together to make their city a better place.

Another GSA project, involving building and renovation around the Byron Rogers Courthouse in Denver, Colorado, (where the Timothy McVeigh trial was held) has received an equally enthusiastic response. Project managers have received calls from numerous organizations that want to contribute to making this dead public space into an inviting place. Even the local phone company, which owns a building with huge, ugly, bare walls is getting involved. They've agreed to have their wall painted with a colorful mural, saying it's only right that they participate in the effort. One group that hopes to use the space for performances said, "We never thought the federal government was approachable before."

In Helena, Montana, where Kent recently consulted on another courthouse, community groups decided to expand the placemaking project beyond the federal property and into a good portion of the adjacent neighborhood because they became so excited about the possibilities for developing life and character in the heart of their city.

On the last day of the Phoenix conference, Altman and her colleagues spoke about their projects, using Kent's language and ideas about placemaking with dexterity. Kent sat quietly to the side, listening. Like any good teacher, he wants those under his tutelage to reach a point where they don't need him any more. It seems that his greatest hope is that one day an organization like the Project for Public Spaces won't be necessary at all. He'd rather our culture become place-oriented, where benches, not spikes, are the first solution to come to mind, and where expert-servants design spaces that invite and foster connectedness between people, simply because it seems natural. ⊖

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