

Federal Spaces, Civic Places



U.S. General Services Administration
 Public Buildings Service
 Center for Urban Development and Livability

Conference Report
 National Field Officers' Training W

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GSA Center for Urban Development and Livability

The U.S. General Services Administration is known best, perhaps, for managing buildings and providing services for federal agencies. Increasingly, however, communities are recognizing the significant impact GSA has on urban areas, particularly downtowns, and involving the agency as a partner in local revitalization strategies.

GSA is the largest urban-oriented real estate organization in the country. It owns or leases more than 300 million square feet of space in more than 1,600 communities, providing space for some one million federal workers. More than 90 percent of that inventory is located in urban areas and more than 400 federal buildings are historically significant. GSA spends more than \$5 billion annually on real estate, maintenance and security services, and each year the agency makes approximately 3,000 leasing and locational decisions.

With this tremendous investment at stake, and with so many people affected by its decisions, GSA is committed to helping the communities where federal facilities are located become more livable and vibrant.

GSA recently created the Center for Urban Development and Livability to help change the way the federal government does business. The center, established in May 1999, helps GSA direct its real estate activity in ways that support local efforts to bolster smart growth, economic vitality and cultural vibrancy.

The center's network of field officers works with local governments and community groups to integrate federal resources into the fabric and life of communities, and to ensure those investments support local development. The center is re-evaluating various federal development, design and leasing policies, and it serves as an information resource for other federal agencies, urban interest groups, local governments and communities.

When major projects, such as building a new federal courthouse or expanding a customs and immigration station, are being considered, the center engages



everyone involved in the decisionmaking process in a dialogue, sometimes for the first time ever. This results in a better understanding of how to enhance the government operations while supporting the development and livability of the community.

The center is always finding new ways for GSA to be a good neighbor—such as creating green space near federal buildings, supporting local business development in plazas and retail space, sharing resources or participating in local business improvement districts. The center is building on a tradition of creating places for people to engage one another, rather than spaces for people to enter and then leave.

The task is not easy, though. Sometimes, federal agencies find it more desirable to abandon downtowns for the convenience of suburbia, citing concerns like crime and security, transit access and parking. The center works to remind both agencies and communities alike that the federal government's overarching goal—affirmed by several Presidential executive orders—is to support the economic stability and revitalization of cities and regions.

We look forward to the work ahead. We know from experience that the federal government and local communities can form productive partnerships that strengthen our urban centers—partnerships that are truly the foundation of sustainable development and livable places.

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A Renewed Federal Mandate

The federal government's impact on the landscape has been vast and pervasive. From the earliest days of the republic, federal investment has spurred the growth of communities and regions, and it has transmitted ideas about what the face of architecture, the form of communities and the character of places ought to be.

The location of facilities like customs houses, court-houses, military bases and highways can make or break a town—conferring political status and prosperity on the lucky recipients. But such investments can also be uneasy impositions—their design unresponsive to local traditions or conditions, their long-term prospects dependent on the patronage of far-away politicians and bureaucrats.

The General Services Administration, which manages the government's enormous real estate operation, is often the focal point for this tension. GSA's Public Buildings Service controls more than 300 million square feet of space in more than 1,600 cities; each year it spends more than \$5 billion for private real estate, maintenance and security services and makes some 3,000 lease and location decisions.

The impact of these activities may be local and, at times, undramatic, but they still can have an important effect on communities. The challenge for GSA has been to consider not only the concerns of the agencies it serves but also these local impacts. As long ago as 1949, Congress required GSA to coordinate federal projects with local plans, and a host of mandates concerning historic preservation, environmental protection and shared use have followed.

Last year GSA established a "Center for Urban Development and Livability," whose focus is helping GSA align its activities more closely with the interests of local communities. Last fall, the center gathered regional GSA administrators, project managers and

urban experts in a workshop that considered the dynamics, potential and process of this renewed federal commitment.

From Lightning Rod to Catalyst

The cause of "livable communities" has become a visible political issue, even meriting mention in President Clinton's

State of the Union address. "A wave of civic revitalization is rolling across the country," Keith Laughlin, from the White House Task Force on Livable Communities, told the workshop. "The federal government can play a key role in this process, and is committed to being a dependable partner to communities wrestling with this issue."

Of course, the arena in which GSA operates is complex. There are client agencies and building management issues to consider, as well as federal policies concerning retail leasing, selling property, environmental review and historic preservation. At the workshop, GSA staff recounted what one person called "the hundred balls we have to juggle":

- Agency concerns (such as parking and security), may conflict with local concerns (such as urban design, traffic and stimulating development downtown). Agencies often seek extra funding for interior amenities, such as furnishings, rather than public amenities, such as plazas, landscaping or public art.
- Government procedures do not always consider the value of addressing broader community concerns.
- Government spending occurs in a political arena, with many layers of oversight, and is unpredictable.



Opposite page: The market and public art on the plaza at the federal building in Chicago are two approaches to making livable places.

Above: The historic Stegmaier Brewery in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., was saved from demolition when GSA converted it into a federal office building.

Photos: Center for Urban Development and Livability

GSA project managers are thus in the position of creating opportunities, cultivating constituencies and crafting deals. Some of the workshop discussions, therefore, focused on good old-fashioned facilitation and negotiating techniques.

But the workshop also considered broader strategies that the center could initiate to help local GSA offices promote community livability. The strategies will necessarily be flexible and situational, responding to project demands and local context. Clearly, however, the center's fundamental role will be to think beyond GSA's basic mission—providing good working conditions for federal workers and good value for public expenditures—to consider how federal investment can most effectively strengthen local communities.

Be a resource. The center can help regional staff and localities simply be being a conduit for information, and by developing new information that supports their work. For example, the center has already teamed with the National Main Street Center to develop a model for assessing the economic impacts federal buildings and workers have in communities.

Be a good neighbor. GSA's "good neighbor" policy seeks to increase the public use of federal buildings and spaces. In San Francisco, that thinking is being applied to the interior organization of a new federal building, according to GSA Regional Administrator Kenn Kojima. "We are trying to combine the idea of livable communities with hassle-free government by using the first few floors as a place where citizens can connect with the government," he said. A post office, passport agency and tax information center will be located there.

Commit client agencies to community goals. "We have to have our clients committed to the community," said George McGrady, a field officer for the center who is based in Atlanta. Otherwise, agencies may seek to move to the suburbs—leaving GSA with a vacant building and damaging efforts to keep downtowns viable.

Sometimes this simply means supporting established community initiatives. In Birmingham, Ala., GSA and the Social Security Administration (SSA) agreed with the local business improvement district to use an SSA parking lot to support after-hours events at the nearby Birmingham Civic Center.

Or it means directing GSA resources to address local problems. In Wilkes-Barre, Pa., an abandoned, historic brewery building was re-opened as federal offices in February, 1998. The brick Victorian Revival building, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, provides space for the SSA, the postal service, a local congressman, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and other federal organizations.

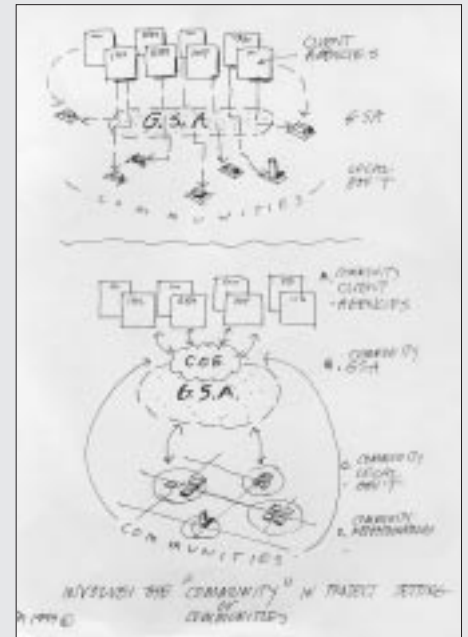
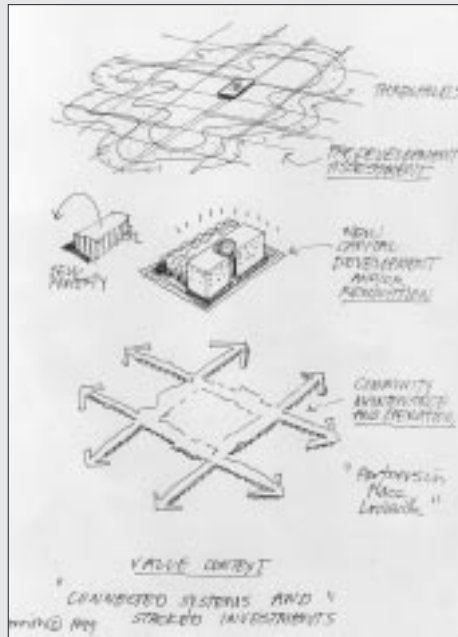
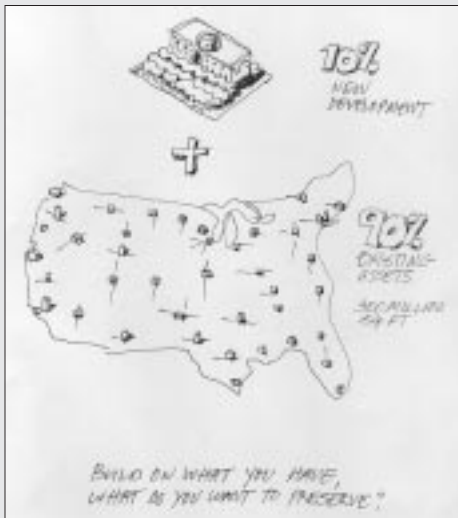
Point out linkages to other federal resources. While agencies like GSA, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Transportation spend billions in urban areas, lower-profile agencies like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration also offer resources. "Federal agencies are all operating with their own missions and own constituencies. Nobody is pulling it all together in one place," said Fred Kent, president of Project for Public Spaces.

Be a partner. The center should be involved in local planning efforts continually, not just when a project comes along. "GSA should be a part of the planning process, not just internalize public opinion into its projects," suggested Elizabeth Jackson, president of the International Downtown Association.

Since new construction comprises only ten percent of GSA's activity, the agency should not overlook its existing properties. "Look at where you are, how people use facilities, why you want to stay," said William Morrish, director of the Design Center for the American Urban Landscape at the University of Minnesota.

That's the idea behind a major initiative in Fort Worth. There, center staff are meeting with GSA and city officials to devise strategies for a civic square that will connect a federal building to development along a transit corridor. One idea involves integrating renovations to the building with development along the main business street. Others include restoring a public fountain in the adjacent federal plaza and redesigning the streetscape and lighting around the building.

Be a convenor. The center should develop the capacity to do focused planning for areas affected by federal investment, urban designer Charles Zucker suggested. That could be especially important to communities that are concerned about livability but have few planning resources, Morrish added.



In Denver, where the center has launched another major initiative, GSA is expanding its federal center next to a transit line, and HUD is supporting a HOPE VI project nearby. GSA could be a convener of federal agencies, "but that's not good enough," city council member Susan Barnes-Gelt said. "Even at the local level, HOPE VI people aren't talking to the BID people, transit isn't talking to anybody."

The center hosted a community workshop designed to map out a strategy for a new downtown district that will link federal and local development efforts to a planned transit corridor. Also, GSA and the local transit agency have collaborated on a plan for location of transit stops in the special district.

Be a catalyst. The center should encourage both its clients and localities to pursue programs that will support livability. "Ask the city to support things you want, such as bringing in housing so workers can feel safe after hours. That is what a private developer would do," said Shelley Poticha, executive director of the Congress for the New Urbanism. In Newark, for example, GSA proposed leasing a city street on which it is establishing a pedestrian mall with a farmers' market.

That includes challenging government notions about buildings. "The way GSA thinks of buildings, as meeting needs of user, is unlike that of developers, who think of the value of their structure. Sometimes you need to tell the clients that the plaza is what will create

long-term value, not the oak in the judges' chambers," said Dena Belzer, principal of Strategic Economics.

She also urged GSA to take risks to leverage private development. "Developers are looking for ways to manage risk. GSA seems even more risk-averse, even though its money is at less risk than developers'."

From Within and Without

The center, still in its first year of operation, is busy with major projects in Denver and Fort Worth and dozens of smaller initiatives elsewhere. For now, its role is that of a convener, collaborator and facilitator, and there should be no underestimating the role it can play as a change agent in that capacity.

Over time, though, as the center gains experience, it will think more about challenging how the federal government does business. This will certainly involve reforming laws and administrative procedures that govern federal real estate operations, but it might also involve fundamental new approaches to federal involvement in local places.

What is not likely to change, however, is the fundamental tension between the federal and the local. One hopes that in adjusting to local conditions, federal projects do not abandon the broader sense of purpose that characterize so many of the federal government's most successful architectural, urban design and engineering endeavors.

Diagrams illustrating the role GSA plays in local communities

Left: The properties GSA already owns and leases play a major role in hundreds of cities

Center: Looking at GSA construction, renovation and property disposition activities within a range of larger contexts

Right: Top-down versus collaborative approaches to planning federal investments

Graphics: William Morrish

Federal Spaces, Civic Places: Patient Acts of Progress

For much of the past year, GSA's Center for Urban Development and Livability has been nurturing a series of quiet experiments in bringing neglected public spaces to life—part of its larger charge to make the federal government a full player in local efforts to promote livable communities.

In some cases the center acts as a catalyst, bringing a sense of possibility to places where none was thought to exist. In others, it plays a supporting role, pledging commitment and providing expertise in places where attention is coalescing. In still others, it challenges the terms of engagement with places, suggesting that the problems being grappled with should be redefined.

Two projects that were underway this winter, and one that is just emerging, illustrate the productive role the center is playing in helping revitalize local civic spaces.

Denver: Expanding Horizons

The federal complex in Denver would be a big part of any downtown. It includes two courthouses and two office buildings, with another courthouse on the way. It covers four blocks and is used by some 5,500 workers.

But “we’ve always been kind of an island. There’s been distinct separation between us and the city,” said Paul Prouty, assistant regional administrator of GSA’s Rocky Mountain Region.

The public spaces around the buildings were drab and lifeless, and the federal area felt neither like a cohesive

district nor as if it were well connected to the rest of the city, observed Janet Preisser, who manages special projects for GSA’s Rocky Mountain Region.

The Byron Rogers Courthouse, in particular, bunkered down while it hosted the Oklahoma City bombing trial. So last summer, GSA launched a “First Impressions” project for the courthouse and an attached office building, hoping “to improve the experience of entering a federal building, to make people feel comfortable but secure,” said Tim Horne, Director of GSA’s Colorado Property Management Center. “We can’t soften security, but we can ease up its presence.”

As the project got underway, Prouty invited the center in for consultation. That process, which began last August, resulted in two key shifts: looking more broadly at the whole neighborhood, and looking more strategically for steps that could be taken quickly.

In November, the region hosted a community workshop that began mapping out a “federal district master plan,” which consultants Gensler and Civitas are helping to prepare. This is no ordinary master plan, participants say. “Instead of the plan leading the process, the building operators are leading it and using the designers as a resource,” explained Fred Kent, president of Project for Public Spaces, which is consulting with the center on the project. “We’ve shifted the balance. They are trying things and seeing how they will fit into a plan. It’s a good way to grow places.”

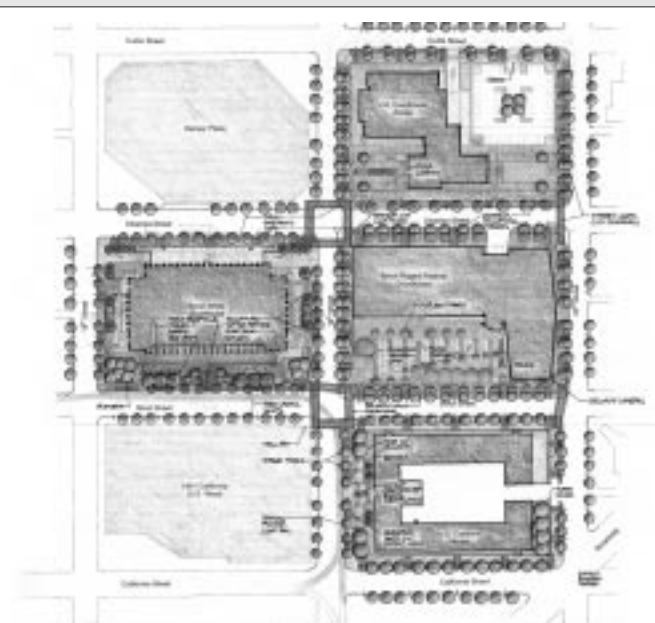
This spring, GSA will unveil some small experiments: planting flowers, installing new benches and garbage cans, and bringing in vendors and planning events. “We’re operational people. It’s hard for us to be patient and wait for a plan to develop. We’re trying to generate some movement,” Horne said.

Mid- and long-term plans include improving identification and wayfinding signage throughout the district, installing fountains and public art, narrowing streets and changing paving materials, and trying to influence development adjacent to the district.

The real power of the endeavor may be in the new partnerships that are emerging:

The four-block federal district in Denver. Clockwise from top right: New courthouse project; Byron Rogers Courthouse and Federal Building; U.S. Customs House; Byron White Courthouse.

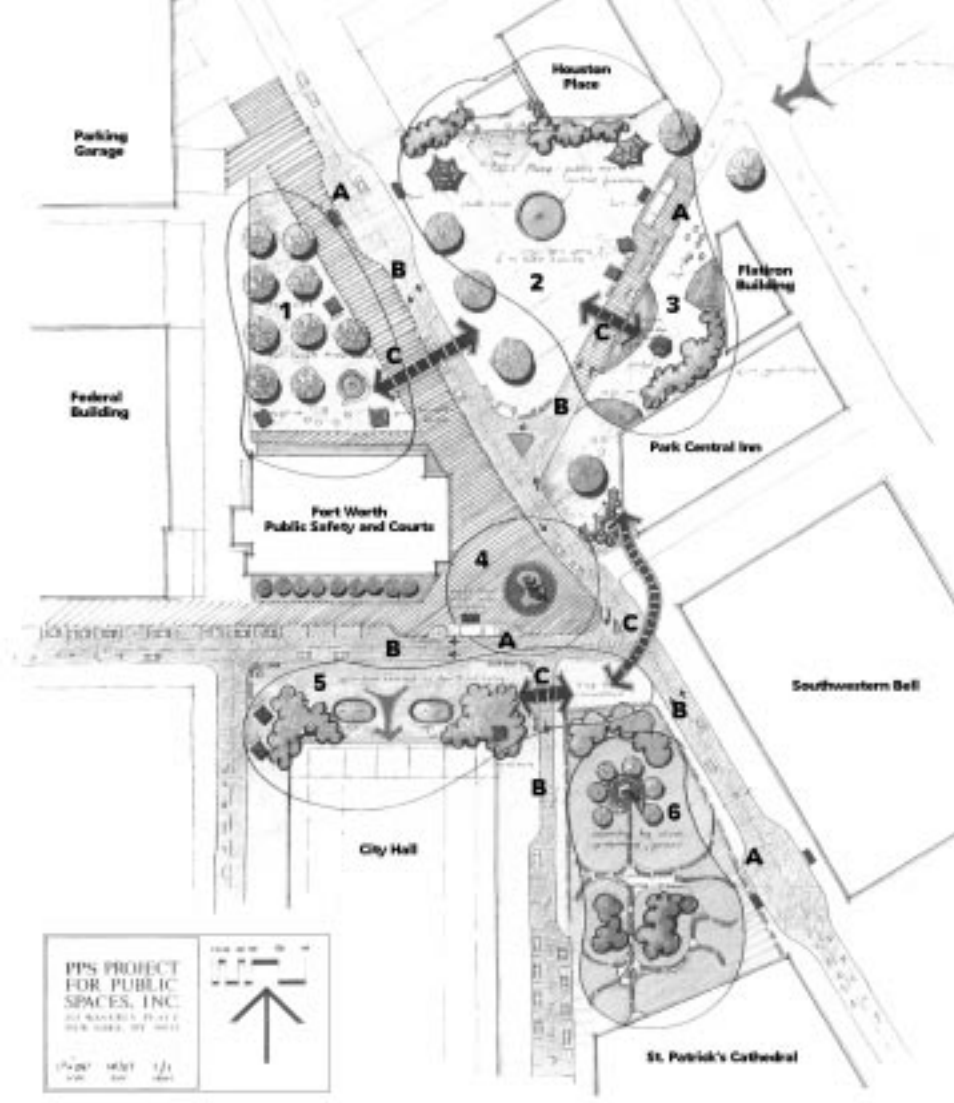
Graphic: Civitas



THE FORT WORTH
DOWNTOWN
PUBLIC SQUARE

1. A park-like setting for lunchtime use, with food and information kiosks.
 2. A public plaza with trees at the edges and a stage. It would be large enough and open enough to host events, such as performances or a market.
 3. A quiet garden-like space with a gazebo and cafe.
 4. A major focal space with a large sculpture.
 5. An entrance plaza for city hall, accentuated with fountains and a cafe.
 6. A formal garden.
- A. Bus stops would be located a short walk from each other, facilitating transfers and generating pedestrian activity.
- B. Narrower streets would slow traffic and facilitate pedestrian crossings.
- C. Pedestrian crossings could be established at strategic points.

Graphic: City of Fort Worth, Project for Public Spaces



- GSA and RTD, the local transit agency, have discussed improving the transit stop that serves the federal center. That might mean installing benches or a small coffee-kiosk/newsstand, or renaming the station to reflect its location better. GSA and RTD are also considering commissioning specially designed bus shelters for the area.

- GSA and US West, which owns a building whose parking garage faces the transit stop and a courthouse, are discussing how the garage facade might be spruced up with a decorative scrim or banners.

Prouty said he didn't consider the master planning process a risky venture at all. "This opened us to some ideas and people that we hadn't experienced before," he said. "We were pretty well sold when we saw what was possible, and the resources available, and when we dealt with local people and saw the excitement this is generating."

Fort Worth: Return of the Civic Square

Last summer Fort Worth city planners asked consultants for advice on how to configure a bus transfer

center near its government center. Little did they expect that the project would metamorphose into an endeavor that few cities have had the ambition to even consider: stitching together six disparate open spaces into a new civic square.

The "Downtown Public Square" idea was hatched last year when Kent suggested that the city should facilitate bus transfers by locating stops for various routes in a concentrated area, rather than at one centralized facility—the better to create dynamic pedestrian activity. He suggested placing stops around a confluence of streets near a group of civic buildings, including city hall and federal offices.

That, in turn, precipitated the idea that the streets and underused spaces in the area might be reorganized into a civic square. Those include a parking lot, a large traffic island and a poorly maintained city park next to the federal building.

While the "public square" project was initiated and is being led by the city's planning department, the center is playing a key role. "The mayor told us that our support is important to getting the serious fund-

ing they would need to make the project happen,” said Harold Hebert, an asset manager in GSA’s Greater Southwest Region. More specifically:

- The center is providing consulting services through Project for Public Spaces.
- The center is studying how GSA can help fund improvements to and maintenance of the park in front of the federal building, a space that is currently owned by the city. One idea: leasing the land from the city.

There are also a number of ideas about how the GSA might assist the public square once it is in operation:

- A federal government parking garage might be opened for public use after hours. Some of the issues being examined are security, making certain there is enough space for federal employees, and paying for night-time operations.
- Power for vendors or activities in the plaza might be supplied from the federal building, which has high-capacity lines, to reduce the cost of new infrastructure.
- A driveway alongside the federal building might be turned into a pedestrian space so it could serve as an extension of the public square along a street.

Representatives from the city, the center, Downtown Fort Worth and the local transit operator are continuing their collaborative efforts. They have organized two working groups, one studying activities and phasing; the other studying transportation, parking and street design. Another public forum was planned for March.

Washington, D.C.: Finding Lost Space

At times the plaza at the Department of Education (DOE) headquarters in Washington, D.C., seems like an orphan of L’Enfant’s well-known plan for the city. The triangular space is within view of the immensely popular Air and Space Museum but separated from it, and the rest of the Mall, by two major streets.

Last summer, as GSA and DOE celebrated the completion of renovations to DOE’s building, they realized the plaza was an important bit of unfinished business. Regional staff linked up with the center, which is helping initiate discussions between DOE, other agencies, cultural institutions and property owners in the area.

Like in Denver and Fort Worth, GSA hopes to bring a broad range of players, such as the Air and Space Museum and the National Park Service, into the fold. Like in Denver, GSA hopes to jumpstart the revitaliza-

tion of the plaza with incremental changes that could be made as early as this spring and summer.

“The first meetings are to get people to realize there is the possibility of doing something together,” said Kent. “People look at this space and have zero in mind. They see nothing but a void until you start showing them the possibilities; then the light bulb turns on.”

While the initial focus will be on connecting the DOE plaza better with the museums, GSA hopes that talks will eventually include other plazas and parks along Maryland Avenue. Most people don’t know, Kent pointed out, that that is the most direct route between the museum area and a Metrorail station.

The strategy of considering new uses for the space, and pursuing quickly implementable ideas, has caught attention, according to Tony Costa, assistant regional administrator for GSA’s National Capital Region. “In the past people probably looked at the plaza from a design perspective, rather than a use perspective. That probably meant a fair amount of money to fix it, and people might not have wanted to go down that road. If we talk about programming, there is hope that they will see an opportunity.”

Cultivating Whole Places

In one sense, the center’s projects in Denver, Fort Worth and Washington are simple acts of constituency building—forging relationships that address the real challenges of making good places. Then, ongoing management strategies are put in place, and on that foundation, longer-term design interventions can be made.

In another sense, the projects are about the humble wonder of discovering, in place after place after place, what balance of management, design and programming will work best. They are experiments built from the ground up, and are establishing a hopeful foundation for accomplishment.

Together, these projects demonstrate the broadening of the federal commitment to excellence in public service design. The emphasis here is not on architecture, preservation or public art per se, but on the whole being of the place, on the ways people use and experience these places, and on the ways these places are related to the larger city.

“This is a chance for our people to be more proud of our buildings, and to make them work better. And, to some extent, I hope it can make the public at large feel better about government,” Prouty said.

Cover images:

Top: Byron Rogers Federal Courthouse, Denver

Bottom: Denver Federal District Master Plan, proposed short-term improvements

Photo and graphic: Civitas

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