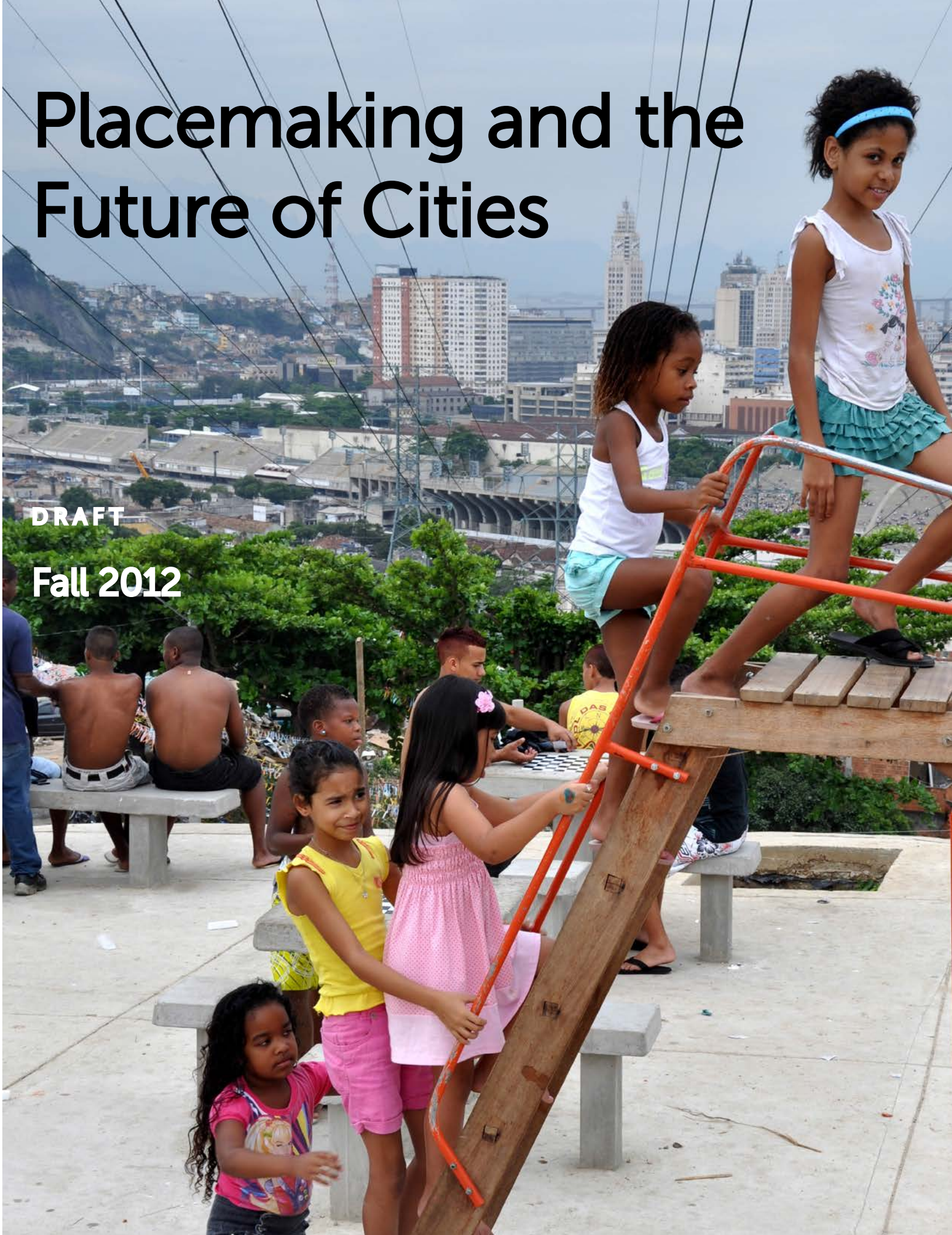
Placemaking and the Future of Cities



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Placemaking and the Future of Cities

By Project for Public Spaces,Inc.

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Why Public Spaces Matter

"What defines a character of a city is its public space, not its private space. What defines the value of the private assets of the space are not the assets by themselves but the common assets. The value of the public good affects the value of the private good. We need to show every day that public spaces are an asset to a city." -- UN-HABITAT Executive Director Joan Clos i Matheu

"You have to turn everything upside down to get it right-side up." --Fred Kent, President, Project for Public Spaces

Building inclusive, healthy, functional, and productive cities is perhaps the greatest challenge facing humanity today. There are no easy solutions. And yet a key part of the puzzle lies right in the heart of the world's urban areas: the public spaces.

Healthy public spaces are the springboard for revitalizing communities, whatever they are and wherever they are. That an attractive, active, well-functioning public space can jumpstart economic development in a community – from a small rural town to a big city – is being recognized increasingly around the world.

Public spaces are a vital ingredient of successful cities. They help build a sense of community, civic identity and culture. Public spaces facilitate social capital, economic development and community revitalization. This is as true in the Global South as it is elsewhere in the world.

Every community has some sort of public space, even if it is not immediately apparent. Sometimes it is obvious -- a shady park with walking paths and benches; a boulevard lined with sidewalks, a grand plaza surrounded by government buildings. But public space is also what we find in between private spaces, and is not always recognized or honored as public. Back alleys, neglected courtyards, and stairways may escape our notice -- but these are nonetheless among a city's most underutilized and potentially valuable assets. Because they belong to everybody, they are perceived as belonging to nobody. And yet if they are claimed, and owned, and developed, they can be harnessed to strengthen and enrich their communities.

When municipalities are struggling economically, investment in public spaces may be seen as a non-essential response. In the Global South, establishing the minimum conditions for proper public space — safety and cleanliness— can be a particular challenge. But the truth is that even a small investment in quality public space delivers a manifold return to the cities with the foresight to see its value. By strengthening the social fabric, providing economic opportunity, and boosting the well-being of citizens, public space can make limited resources go further and enrich the community both socially and monetarily.

Transforming Cities through Placemaking & Public Spaces: About the Program

In 2011, UN-HABITAT and Project for Public Spaces (PPS) signed a cooperative agreement, **Transforming Cities through Placemaking & Public Spaces**, to harness the power of public space for the common good. By recognizing and developing the positive potential of their public spaces, cities can enhance safety and security, create economic opportunity, improve public health, create diverse public environments, and build democracy.

The five-year cooperation agreement between UN-HABITAT and PPS is multifaceted in its goals. It aspires to raise international awareness of the importance of public space; to foster a lively exchange of ideas among partners; and to educate a new generation of planners, designers, community activists, and other civic leaders about the benefits of the Placemaking methodology. The cooperation is global in scope, with activities at the city level, actively engaging local partners in the important work of improving their own communities.

In a century where the "Right to the City" is increasingly being recognized as a fundamental human entitlement, this partnership is helping to advance the development of cities where people of all income groups, social classes, and ages can live safely, happily, and in economic security.

The **United Nations Human Settlements Program, UN-HABITAT**, is mandated by the UN General Assembly to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities with the goal of providing adequate shelter for all. The United Nations Millennium Declaration recognizes the dire circumstances of the world's urban poor. It articulates the commitment of Member States to improve the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by the year 2020, a charge that falls under UN-HABITAT's mission.

The **Sustainable Urban Development Network (SUD-Net)** is an innovative platform for partners engaged in, or willing to work with, interdisciplinary approaches to sustainable urban development. It brings on board local authorities, institutions, the private sector, and other partners specialized in the urban field. Through SUD-Net, practical collaboration with and among networks has been enhanced.

SUD-Net has selected yearly themes that can demonstrate multisectoral approaches to urban development and which will promote interdepartmental cooperation. Public space is the current theme and focus of SUD-Net. SUD-Net recognizes that public space development is multidisciplinary and therefore reflects the goals of SUD-Net in bringing various disciplines and sectors together to form a strengthened and comprehensive approach to urban development.

Project for Public Spaces, Inc. (PPS), a nonprofit organization established in 1975, has pioneered a "Placemaking" approach to public spaces. This approach is based on a belief that it is not enough to simply develop design ideas and elements to revitalize a public space. A public involvement process that defines and responds to community conditions and needs from the outset is one of the most critical factors in designing a successful public space. PPS has developed a number of planning tools designed to enable communities to develop a vision for their neighborhoods. Partnering with public and private organizations, federal, state and municipal agencies, business improvement districts, neighborhood associations and other civic groups around the world, PPS improves communities by fostering successful public spaces.

PPS trains more than 10,000 people each year, many from the international community, and reaches countless more through its websites and publications. PPS has become an internationally recognized center for resources, tools and inspiration about Placemaking.

The Challenge

"Urbanization is the defining trend of the 21st century; by 2030, 75 percent of the world's 9 billion people will be living in cities. And urbanization is occurring most rapidly in places with the greatest lack of planning for urbanization." — UN-HABITAT Executive Director Joan Clos i Matheu

Cities and towns are growing at unprecedented rates. In 1950, one-third of the world's population lived in cities. Just 50 years later, this proportion has risen to one-half and is expected to continue to grow to two-thirds, or six billion people, by 2050. In many cities, especially in developing countries, slum dwellers number more than 50 percent of the population and have little or no access to shelter and other basic services like electricity, clean water, and sanitation. These conditions are unacceptable. They can, and must, be changed.

Streets, squares, and parks, especially in the informal city, are often chaotic, poorly planned and maintained -- if they exist at all. In this context, there are multiple challenges presented by the public spaces themselves:

Lack of Public Space Especially in informal settlements, public spaces can be lacking altogether, increasing tension and stress for people who live in crowded and inadequate conditions. In other cases, new commercial and residential development can destroy traditional public space, as older neighborhoods with well-established social patterns are wiped out to make way for high-rise development, resulting in a profound dislocation of the population and disruption of centuries-old ways of living together and sharing resources.
Streets, in particular, have for millennia been a vital part of the public realm, providing a place where merchants can sell their wares, children can play, and people can stop to talk. The growing prevalence of the automobile has squeezed out these uses. Reclaiming streets as places for people can strengthen cities in a variety of ways – economically, environmentally, as well as socially.

Lack of Planning for Public Spaces. All over the world, sprawl development is allowed to spread without any plan for public space. Sometimes, builders create "public" space that is actually private — behind the walls of gated communities, inside malls that are patrolled by security guards, or within exclusive clublike recreational areas. All of these types of spaces create the illusion that public space exists, but in actuality function to separate people by class and income, as well as sometimes by ethnicity and religion.

Lack of Public Spaces That Bring People Together. The best public spaces bring together people from all walks of life and all income groups. The presence of multiple types of people ensures that no one group dominates, and that the space is safe and welcoming for all, including women and youth. Where public space is absent, inadequate, poorly designed, or privatized, the city becomes increasingly segregated. Lines are drawn based on religion, ethnicity, and economic status. The result can be a dangerously polarized city where social tensions are more likely to flare up and where social mobility and economic opportunity are stifled.

Lack of Participation and Poor Design. These are not only matters for planners, designers, and bureaucrats to decide in a void. Only with full public participation in the creation of public spaces can truly great places come into being. Building a city is an organic process, not a simple recipe or a one-size-fits-all pattern. Local customs must always be considered and honored. Maintenance costs must remain within reason for the community involved.

Better Public Spaces Through Placemaking. The Placemaking process, when it is conducted with transparency and good faith from the bottom up, results in a place where the community feels ownership and engagement, and where design serves function. Here, human needs will be met and fulfilled, for the betterment of all.

Placemaking is a skill that is transferred either formally or informally. It identifies and catalyzes local leadership, funding, and other resources. Placemaking is a bottom-up approach that empowers and engages people in ways that traditional planning processes do not. It draws on the assets and skills of a community, rather than on relying solely on professional "experts."

The Placemaking approach is defined by the recognition that when it comes to public spaces, "the community is the expert." It follows that strong local partnerships are essential to the process of creating dynamic, healthy public spaces that truly serve a city's people. Public spaces are also a common goal that local governments, diverse existing groups and NGOs can work on collaboratively in a democratic process.

Each place, each culture, is unique. Questions of societal norms, climate, and tradition must all be considered. What works for a Northern European city might be completely inappropriate for one in Southeast Asia. Therefore, every culture needs to find the tools and approaches that work for them.

About This Handbook

This handbook will serve as a guide for use by municipal leaders in future public space projects laying out 10 best practices for public space projects. These 10 facets of the Placemaking approach illustrate the process that PPS and UN-Habitat have undertaken together, and demonstrate the effectiveness of such global partnerships in sustainable urban development through networks such as SUD-Net.

UN-Habitat has been developing a vision for public space. PPS has taken this vision as a starting point and has expanded it to incorporate case study narratives describing the impact of the Placemaking process in nearly a dozen cities throughout the Global South. The goal is to bring Placemaking to bear in the development of public space on a global scale.

UN-Habitat plans to use this document as a template for other public space projects and will share these tools, examples, and processes with other cities for them to then adopt for their own public space projects. This is a draft that will continue to evolve and be expanded over time to incorporate the outcomes of additional joint Placemaking initiatives.

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Ten Ways to Improve Your City

With all the challenges facing cities today, particularly in the Global South, it can be hard to know how to tackle the problem of creating vibrant, safe, attractive public spaces. The following fundamental principles will provide a starting point for discussion and action. This is a draft document, and it will be updated periodically with further case studies and other input.

1. Improve Streets as Public Spaces

Streets are the fundamental public space in every city, the lifeblood of social and economic exchange. Yet today, more and more streets are simply choked with car traffic vying for space with pedestrians and bicyclists. No one "wins" this game.

Placemaking promotes a simple principle: if you plan cities for cars and traffic, you get cars and traffic. If you plan for people and places, you get people and places. It is not true that more traffic and road capacity are the inevitable results of growth. They are in fact the products of very deliberate choices that have been made to shape our communities to accommodate the private automobile. We have the ability to make different choices — starting with the decision to design our streets as comfortable and safe places — for people on foot, not people in cars.

As cities in the developing world expand, safe and effective public transit systems must expand accordingly. Even streets that are designed for Bus Rapid Transit — as beneficial as this approach is — must be designed to support a range of uses. Proper urban design can facilitate vibrant public spaces.

With the right balance, streets can accommodate vehicles and become destinations worth visiting. Transit stops and stations can make commuting by rail or bus a pleasure. Neighborhood streets can be places where parents feel safe letting their children play, and commercial strips can be designed as grand boulevards, safe for walking and cycling and allowing for both through and local traffic. Streets that are planned for people, meaning they are not completely auto-centric, add to the social cohesion of communities by ensuring human interaction, and providing safe public spaces that promote cultural expression.

Cities historically were laid out around streets. New York City's grid system, which just celebrated its 200th anniversary, is particularly notable – a third of Manhattan is public space. Facing massive urbanization, cities today need to get ahead of the development curve and lay out streets in advance of actual development, informal or formal. These should not be just arteries for vehicles, but a hierarchy of different street types, from quiet neighborhood lanes to major boulevards — all of which will become the places of the city's future.

2. Create Squares and Parks as Multi-Use Destinations

Parks and squares can sometimes be viewed as a frivolity, an unnecessary drain on resources or use of precious urban space. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, parks and squares reward investment disproportionately. If developed as "places" and planned around major public destinations, they build local economies, civic pride, social connection, and human happiness — all precious commodities in an increasingly congested urban landscape.

A great urban park is a safety valve for the city, where people living in high density can find breathing room. A bad park is a place of fear and danger. A great square can be a focal point of civic pride and help to make citizens feel connected to their cultural and political institutions. A bad square repels people, business, and investment.

In many ways, the word "park" or "square" is too limiting today, as both terms imply a set of design features and uses that may not be enough to make a successful public space. A city's best public spaces are multi-use destinations. In wealthy neighborhoods and impoverished ones, they are places that attract people of all ages and income groups, men and women alike. This is where citizens can find common ground — where ethnic and economic tensions can be overlooked and disparate sectors of society can come together peacefully.

Communities everywhere can decide what it is that makes their public spaces a destination. Is it an amenity? A performance space? A place for youth? A market for local products? Usually the answer is more than one of these, but the right mix is up to the people who will use the place.

3. Build Local Economies Through Markets

The evolution of cities is based on commerce linking urban and rural economies. Cities emerged because people gathered together at crossroads to exchange goods and ideas. This essential function of urban centers has remained unchanged for centuries.

Since the beginning of human history, public markets have been at the heart of cities. Much more than commercial hubs, they are traditionally among the most dynamic and productive places in our cities and towns. Here, people exchange the news of the day, from local gossip to national politics. In the marketplace, people build and solidify the social ties that are necessary for a healthy society.

At their best, markets bring people of different ethnic groups and income levels together in a safe, inviting public space. They provide opportunity for people at the lower end of the economic spectrum, allowing entrepreneurs, including women, to sustain themselves and their families with a minimum of capital investment. They encourage the preservation of farmland around cities, as well as feeding money back into the rural economy and strengthening ties between urban and rural areas. Markets invigorate surrounding neighborhoods and provide access to fresh food and other necessities of life.

Yet all too many cities don't value their markets for their benefits, investing instead in "modern" supermarkets and hypermarkets that have little impact on the local economy – discovering this reality too late. In the U.S., cities closed down their market systems in the mid-20th century, but new farmers' markets began emerging spontaneously throughout the country. More than 7,000 of these markets are operating today.

The informal economy thrives in most cities – but often chaotically, clogging streets, competing unfairly with local businesses, and limiting the hope of upward mobility to marginalized members of society. Markets can, however, provide a structure and a regulatory framework that helps small businesses grow, preserves food safety, and makes a more attractive destination for shoppers.

4. Design Buildings to Support Places

Every building sends a message to the people around it. What should the buildings we are constructing today say to and reflect about our communities?

With extremely rapid urbanization ongoing throughout the world, new buildings are going up at an unprecedented pace. Massive gated communities are being built for the middle class, exacerbating the gulf between rich and poor. Traditional neighborhoods are being replaced by towering skyscrapers, sometimes only meters apart. Civic institutions such as schools and libraries, key community assets, end up looking like fortresses. This trend has spread across the globe, and it is damaging the fabric of cities everywhere.

It is important to seriously consider what kind of architecture will best serve the billions of people who live in the world's cities. Whether we like the structures as pure formal objects is another matter, and not of primary significance. What is truly significant is whether architecture creates a place. Architecture that enhances place is permeable at the street level and engages with the city's fabric. It is always built with the human scale in mind. It supports and contributes to the liveliness of an adjacent neighborhood. This is especially critical for city investment in public institutions such as museums, government buildings and libraries. These facilities, again designed as multi-use destinations, can become important anchors for civic activity that host a broader range of activities. But not if they are walled off from the city around them, with their interiors, however bustling, invisible to the surrounding neighborhood.

5. Link a Public Health Agenda to a Public Space Agenda

A healthy city is one in which citizens have access to basic infrastructure such as clean water, ablution facilities, and sewage treatment. It is also a place where healthy food is available, where women and children can walk without fear, and where people can enjoy parks, squares, and other public spaces in safety and comfort.
A broad public health agenda can greatly strengthen a public space agenda, and vice versa. Health care facilities themselves can serve as community centers. Cultural institutions such as libraries can provide health education and services. Well-run public markets are a source of fresh, affordable, and nutritious food. Transportation systems can encourage walking and reduce car traffic and air pollution. Ironically, the developed world is facing a major epidemic of obesity and diabetes, fueled in part by simple lack of safe places to walk and the unhealthy foods available in aisle after aisle of modern supermarkets.

Perhaps even more important is the overall psychological effect that well-conceived and managed public spaces can have on a city's health. Public parks where all people feel safe to play and relax can relieve stress, especially when people live in crowded informal settlements. Crime rates and gang activity go down when more people are out on the street and know their neighbors. If civic institutions are housed in approachable buildings, people feel encouraged to take part in public health programs.

Where people feel a sense of ownership in their cities — something that Placemaking fosters — they are more likely to take better care of the common environment and of themselves.

HOW TO DO IT

6. Reinvent Community Planning

Local people have the best understanding of the assets and challenges of a particular place. The important starting point in developing a concept for any public space agenda should be to identify the talents and resources within the community -- people who can provide historical perspective, insights into how the area functions, and an understanding of what is truly meaningful to the local people. Tapping this information at the beginning of the process will help to create a sense of ownership in the project that can ensure its success for years to come.

Partners are also critical to the future success and image of a public space improvement project. Local institutions, museums, schools, formal and informal neighborhood groups, business associations -- all these can be valuable allies. Brainstorm and develop scenarios with these people. Involve them from start to finish. They are invaluable in getting a project off the ground and keeping it going.
With these groups, cities can work to develop a vision for how to improve public spaces. What kinds of activities might be happening in the space? Who will be using it? What resources can be tapped to start making improvements right away?

Public spaces are complex, organic things. You cannot expect to do everything right initially. The best spaces evolve over time when you experiment with short-term improvements that can be tested and refined over many years.

Professionals such as traffic engineers, transit operators, urban planners, and architects often have narrow definitions of their jobs — facilitating traffic, making trains run on time, creating long-term schemes for building cities, designing buildings. By contrast, a community has a holistic vision and should lead the professionals in implementing that vision and acting as facilitators and resources. The key is to improve communication between the people and local government.

Over time, things change, and public spaces and the communities they serve must change with them. New groups move in, while others move out. Amenities wear out. Different forms of recreation go in and out of fashion. Good public spaces are always flexible, responding to the evolution of the urban environment. Remaining open to the need for change and having the community maintain control over enacting that change is what builds not just great public spaces, but great cities and towns.

7. The Power of 10

The Power of 10 is a concept to kick-start the Placemaking process. Every time we talk about this idea, citizens become more energized to turn their places around. The Power of 10 offers an easy framework that motivates residents and stakeholders to revitalize urban life, and it shows that by starting efforts at the smallest scale, you can accomplish big things. The concept also provides people something tangible to strive for and helps them visualize what it takes to make their community great.

The number 10 is not set in stone. The core principle is the importance of offering a variety of things to do in one spot — making a place more than the sum of its parts. A park is good. A park with a fountain, playground, and food vendor is better. If there's a library across the street, that's better still, even more so if they feature storytelling hours for kids and exhibits on local history. If there's a sidewalk café nearby, a bus stop, a bike path, and an ice cream stand, then you have what most people would consider a great place.

What if a neighborhood had 10 places that were that good? The area would then achieve a critical mass — a series of destinations where residents and tourists alike would become immersed in the life of the city for days at a time.

Taking the next step, what if a city could boast 10 such neighborhoods? Then all residents would have access to outstanding public spaces within walking distance of their homes. That's the sort of goal we need to set for all cities if we are serious about enhancing and revitalizing urban life.

Again, it is the people who use the space regularly are the best source of ideas for what uses will work best. It's the Placemakers' role to encourage everyone to think about what's special in their communities. How many quality places are located nearby, and how are they connected? Are there places that should be more meaningful but aren't? Answering these questions can help residents and stakeholders determine — both individually and collectively — where they need to focus their energies.

8. Create a Comprehensive Public Space Agenda

A comprehensive approach to developing, enhancing, and managing public space requires both "top-down" and "bottom-up" strategies. Leadership at the highest level of city is essential if transformation of public spaces is to occur on a large scale. A "bottom-up" grassroots organizing strategy is also integral to the strategy.

The first step in developing a citywide agenda is to make an honest assessment of how existing public spaces are performing — or underperforming. Communities should make note of a schoolyard that often sits empty, for instance, a lifeless plaza, a dilapidated park. The assessment should include every neighborhood and involve the people who live there as well as other key stakeholders. Tools like the Power of 10 (see Point 8) can be useful in making this assessment.

With this inventory, city leadership can develop a bold consensus vision. For example, in New York, the city set out a goal to carve a new "public plaza" out of existing street space in each of the 59 community board districts. Such a district-by-district approach encourages residents and officials to look at their neighborhoods anew and bring unexpected possibilities to light. Unused and underused spaces can be identified and improved in a systematic way, ensuring that the benefits are distributed geographically, strengthening the entire fabric of the city and building equity.

Any public space agenda must also be tied to new development projects. Governments should take advantage of growing real estate markets in cities by creating incentives for developers to preserve and enhance the public environments that are so greatly affected by their projects. A small tax on new development (successful in Chicago) could fund many of the improvements identified in the process of creating a public space agenda.

Public space programs are emerging at the national scale as well, using the many of the same principles. Brazil has launched a very ambitious initiative that is aimed at the development of 800 "public squares" in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities cities across the country over the next three years. These squares will be holistic gathering places combining sports facilities with cultural uses (such as libraries) and a variety of social services that are much needed by people in these vulnerable communities.

9. Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper: Start Small, Experiment

Public spaces are complex, organic things. You cannot expect to do everything right initially. The best spaces evolve by experimenting with short-term improvements that can be tested and refined over many years. Places to sit, a sidewalk café, a community event, a container garden, painted crosswalks — all these are examples of "Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper" (LQC) positive changes that can be accomplished in a short time.

LQC is not just lower risk and lower cost, but capitalizes on the creative energy of the community to efficiently generate new uses and revenue for places in transition. LQC projects allow citizens to try out new things. If one thing doesn't work, try something else. If you have a success, build on it. LQC can take many forms, requiring varying degrees of time, money, and effort. It offers exceptional flexibility and serves as an ever-evolving means to build lasting change. Especially in the Global South, where resources are limited, this is a useful strategy.

Cities historically have been developed "lighter, quicker, cheaper" —with new settlements built simply to start and evolving to increasing complexity over time. So it is an approach appropriate in any kind of city, but which may have special resonance with people living in today's informal settlements, who are accustomed to using lightweight, innovative strategies, rather than major capital investments, to solve problems and reshape their environments.

Cities can create "demonstration" LQC projects to draw upon local assets and people, transforming underutilized urban spaces into exciting laboratories that reward citizens with authentic places and provide a boost to areas in need. These projects provide a powerful means of translating stakeholder visioning into physical reality.

10. Restructure Government to Support Public Spaces

As we have seen, Placemaking identifies and catalyzes local leaders, funding, and other resources. The Placemaking approach builds on the abil¬ity of local institutions to create great community places that bring people together and reflect community values and needs. This is a traditional, organic human skill that often goes underutilized by top-heavy technocratic bureaucracies.

Unfortunately, government is generally not set up to support public spaces and Placemaking. Rarely is anyone in the official power structure actively focused on creating a successful public realm. Not only are there not individuals or departments focused on public spaces, but as a whole government does not explicitly seek successful public spaces as an outcome. The structure of departments and the processes they require in fact sometimes impede the creation of successful public spaces. Transportation departments view their mission as moving traffic; parks departments are there to create and manage green space; community development agencies are focused on development of projects, not the spaces in between them.

If the ultimate goal of governance, urban institutions, and development is to make places, communities, and regions more prosperous, civilized, and attractive for all people, then government processes need to change to reflect that goal. This requires the development of consensus-building, city consultation processes, and institutional reform, all of which enhance citizenship and inclusion. Effectively conceived and managed public spaces require the involvement of non-state partners, such as NGOs. But, while improving public space can meet the goals of NGOs and foundations, civil society itself needs ways to collaborate more effectively with government. In other words, government needs to mobilize to develop and implement bottom-up policies as well as top-down ones.

The challenge is to include rather than to exclude, to share responsibility and investment, and to encourage new modes of integration and regulation based on public good — not purely private interest. In cities where Placemaking has taken hold, local government is often not directly involved, for example, in implementation, but relies on community development organizations, business improvement districts, and neighborhood partnerships to take the lead in making community change happen.

The concept of low-cost improvements that can be made in a mat¬ter of weeks or months changes the way that cities approach community development. It requires removing bureaucratic obstacles to quickly add value to a place and clearly demonstrate future potential. Working together on short-term changes can help build bridges between city agencies as well as to citizens, benefiting long-term implementation and maintenance as well.

Case Studies

Improve Streets as Public Spaces

Case study: Medellín, Colombia

The Colombian city of Medellín has built a transportation system that brings together the formal and informal cities, enhances street life, and contributes to social cohesion. The Medellín Metrocable, an aerial tram system, serves the neighborhoods on the city's hillsides, formerly some of Medellín's most crime-ridden and gang-infested areas. Residents of the traditionally marginalized settlements now have quick access to the city's main subway system — a connection that used to entail a daunting walk up and down hundreds of steps or a lengthy minibus ride.

When constructing the Metrocable, the city took the opportunity to invest in improving the long-neglected hillside barrios. Plazas at the bases of the pylons supporting the tram have become lively neighborhood centers, with food vendors, seating, and landscaping. Parks, sporting fields, and libraries have been constructed nearby. New schools were built, and older ones were improved. Pedestrian walkways link parts of the city that used to be controlled by rival gangs, and murder rates have plummeted. Not only that, people from the formal city in the valley now feel safe visiting the hillside barrios.

The plazas along the length of the Metrocable have become lively public spaces that are programmed and managed by the users themselves.
Photo credit: Daniel Latorre

The Metrocable is more than a transportation facility; it is a vital integrative link between formal and informal areas of the city; it provides access to the city center and employment centers for neighborhood residents.
Photo credit: Andres Carter

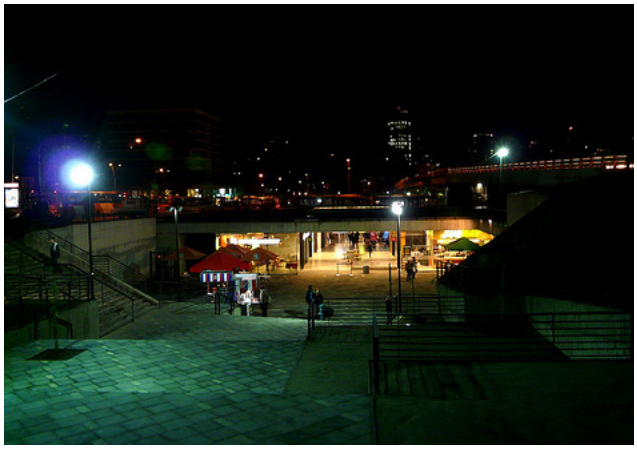
Create Squares and Parks as Multi-Use Destinations

Case study: Santiago, Chile

Despite being in one of the most important neighborhoods in Santiago, Chile, anchored by one of the busiest train and bus stations in the city, the Las Condes plazas and commercial galleries had become a place to pass through as quickly as possible. After the galleries were built in the 1980s, they steadily lost customers to the city's shopping malls and became desolate and forbidding. Compounding the problem was an unfortunate design flaw, a surfeit of entrances that made the square — especially in its increasingly empty state — appealing only to criminals who targeted people passing through.

SubCentro after the redesign based on a collaborative placemaking process all
Photos: Marcello Corbo

Marcello Corbo and Rodrigo Jullian, co-founders of Urban Development, saw this well-located space as a major opportunity for both the city and their company. Their vision was to invest in the public spaces and, through that, make the retail feasible.



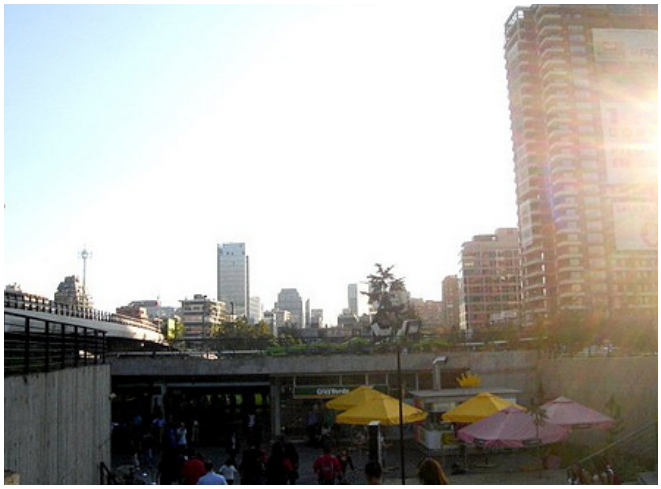
SubCentro glows at night, creating a safe and welcoming public space

Over the following five years, Urban Development forged alliances with the city government, Metro, the Ministry of Transportation and the community to make those changes and realize SubCentro's potential. The project became an exceptionally collaborative one: the municipality of Las Condes created new plazas and taxi stops; the Ministry of Transportation modified the street design and created new bus stops; the Metro leased the galleries to Urban Development; and Urban Development found the vendors, rented out the stalls, reduced and improved access points, and created a private team to manage the site.

In 2005, Mr. Corbo invited PPS to Santiago to look at the site and hold a workshop with the design team and city partners. PPS developed a series of design and management recommendations and principles for the team to follow through the process.

The redesign made a huge impact with some relatively small changes, like letting in more light to make the underpasses feel safer and more welcoming, changing the park design into a plaza surface to promote more public uses, and replacing the barriers between businesses with glass panels to create a feeling of continuity and openness. The resulting effect was akin to an old-fashioned marketplace, blurring the distinction between inside and out, and between private and public.

Since the galleries opened in March 2008, SubCentro Las Condes has kept the community involved with creative outreach strategies. SubCentro is an exemplar of a private-public partnership creating a thriving public space. It sets a new standard for public space creativity that would be difficult for a more narrowly focused municipal or government agency to replicate.



Letting in more light makes the underpasses feel safer as well.

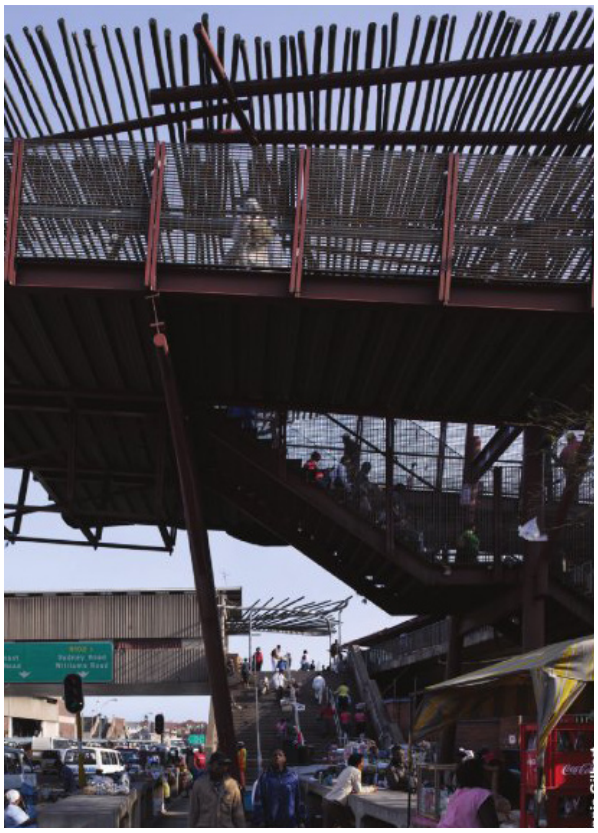
Build Local Economies Through Markets

Case study: Durban, South Africa

The Traditional Medicine and Herb Market in the Warwick Junction neighborhood of Durban, South Africa, was once a ramshackle and dangerous place. Vendors had to sell their goods in the open air from the pavement, and sleep on the sidewalk under a highway with their wares to protect them from thieves. Wastewater from the preparation of the local delicacy of bovine heads was drained into the municipal stormwater system, attracting vermin and clogging pipes.

But a redesign has changed all that. The local municipality has developed a comprehensive approach to improving local infrastructure, and the market is one of its premier projects. Government workers went to the traders and found out what they needed and wanted, then repurposed empty space in the market's neighborhood to create enclosed stalls for vendors and locked storage spaces. Pedestrian routes have been widened, allowing easier movement for shoppers. The vendors preparing bovine heads are now equipped with sanitary cooking facilities. The result of all these improvements, informed by the very people who were to use them, has been an economic blossoming, a safer market, and a dramatic increase in opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship.

Durban is the third largest city in South Africa, and is famous for its nature and beaches as well as its great ethnic diversity. This manifests itself in the many informal markets around the city that provide economic opportunities for the poor. These markets also create opportunities for people to socialize and for entrepreneurs to develop their creativity.



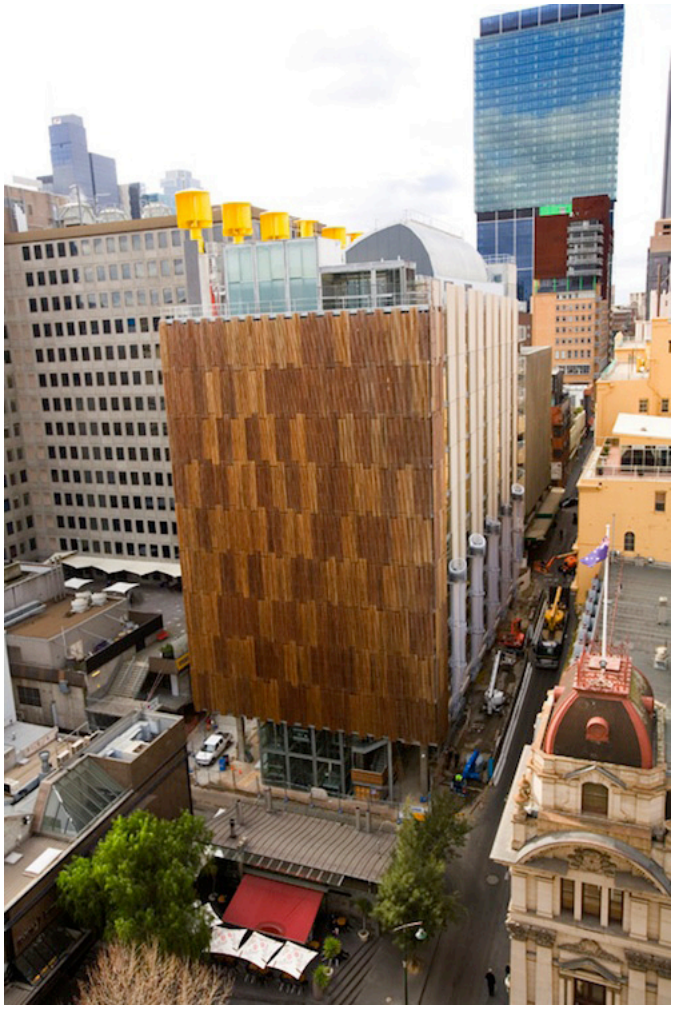
New coverings over the Traditional Medicine and Herb Market
Photo credit: Design Workshops and eThekwini Municipality

Design Buildings to Support Places

Case study: Melbourne, Australia

Melbourne, Australia, is a city that is reaching for the best in urbanism on many fronts. It boasts an impressive municipal office building, Council House 2, that richly enhances the surrounding neighborhood. This bold, beautiful architectural accomplishment earned Australia's six-star Green Star rating in 2005, using innovative "biomimicry" technologies that mirror natural systems to save energy and water.

But it is much more than just a showcase "green" building. At the ground level, it is dynamically connected to the surrounding neighborhood, fostering street life and creating a strong sense of place. The area around the building is enhanced by shade structures and other amenities, making this a comfortable place and an integral part of the community and creating a friendly, healthy microclimate in its immediate vicinity. It shows that "iconic" architecture need not be divorced from the urban fabric. The best architecture exists in constant dialogue with the people and places around it.



The design of CH2 is beautiful and environmentally sound. Photo: Fred Kent.

Even more important, people gather in front of it. The building is surrounded by people, doing things because there are things to do. Photo: Ethan Kent.

Link a Public Health Agenda to a Public Space Agenda

Case Study: Detroit, United States

The city of Detroit is working on a new vision for its future that will address long-term challenges while improving the quality of life for its residents in the short term. "Rebuilding Detroit's Neighborhoods through Placemaking and the Power of 10" is an initiative that offers concrete solutions on the neighborhood scale that will result in significant quality of life improvements. The project leverages the gathering power of food and markets as catalysts for bringing people together, while building public spaces by improving vacant lots, existing parks, or too-wide streets. These public spaces will build a new sense of community and create opportunities for people to come together.

It has been widely recognized that Detroit's inner city is home to one of the worst "food deserts" in the country. Detroit's neighborhoods are also often "place deserts": they lack public spaces where people can gather, they lack lively shopping streets where street life binds residents together, and many have limited numbers of neighborhood destinations. Existing neighborhood facilities such as schools, clinics, or community centers tend to be internalized, and offer specific, sometimes one-dimensional experiences. That is also often the case with neighborhood parks or community gardens, which could have much stronger impact as community destinations.

Project for Public Spaces, with support from the Kresge Foundation, is addressing the lack of place in communities by building on the growth of neighborhood farmers' markets in Detroit. Farmers' markets offer an opportunity for short term, immediate steps to enhance access to fresh, local food and to use the gathering power of markets as catalysts for retail development while building a stronger sense of community. While the city is developing its Detroit Works plan for the future, small scale, focused interventions in targeted neighborhoods can send a strong message to residents about the power of community in neighborhood revitalization.

Central Detroit is a neighborhood with a lot of basic needs. Despite its location in the United States, it shares many problems with the Global South. Many residents are out of work. Many don't own cars, and the public transit system is utterly inadequate. Safety and security are a major concern — the city can't even keep up with repairing broken streetlights. A lot of houses are abandoned and occupied by squatters.

Last fall PPS was thrilled to be part of a very successful harvest festival outside the wonderful Central Detroit produce market Peaches & Greens (with key support from the Kresge Foundation and working with the Central Detroit Christian Community Development Corporation). Although flanked by vacant lots, Peaches & Greens proved to be the right spot for the festival — and the event showed how this could evolve into an even better place for the neighborhood to come together.

The tough conditions faced by local people made the response to the festival even more heartening. People were ready to jump right in and become part of something more meaningful. They provided a lot of practical ideas for activities could be taking place around Peaches & Greens on a more regular basis. One thing we heard from a lot of local residents was that they are eager to see more community-building events in the neighborhood.

A harvest festival and community celebration temporarily transformed the atmosphere in an inner-city Detroit neighborhood.

As there was no formal public space, the festival was held in the street and the parking lot of the produce market.

Reinvent Community Planning

Case Study: Nairobi, Kenya

Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI) transforms impoverished communities by collaborating with residents to create low-cost, high-impact built environments (Productive Public Spaces) that improve their daily lives. Photo Credit: KDI

Opening celebration, Kibera Public Space Project 03. Photo Credit: Miss Emily Lowery

Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI) transforms impoverished communities by collaborating with residents to create low-cost, high-impact built environments (Productive Public Spaces) that improve their daily lives. Begun in 2006, KDI is an innovative international partnership specializing in the practices of architecture, landscape architecture, engineering, and urban planning. KDI believes that participatory planning and design are key to sustainable development. By working collaboratively with communities from conception through implementation, they build on the ideas of local residents, enhance them with technical knowledge and design innovation, and connect them to extant resources. In doing so, KDI empowers communities to advocate for themselves and address the major physical, social, and economic challenges they face.

In early 2011, KDI identified a space in Nairobi's largest informal settlement, Kibera, for a third Public Space Project – a site that lies along the river that runs through the settlement. The two large riverbanks here flood during the rainy season, and the site is used for waste disposal throughout the year. Poor drainage along the access roads greatly decreases residents' pedestrian access to and from their houses, although the two banks are connected by a bridge. Despite pollution, the river is currently used as a play area for children, a laundry area for families, and gathering area for nearby residents.

During summer 2011 the KDI Kenya team conducted numerous community workshops with residents and the community partners to prioritize needs, create design solutions, and explore micro-enterprise opportunities at the site. The resulting project design includes: a poultry farm; an improved drainage channel; flood control; a community center to house a school and health clinic; kiosks; and a playground constructed from locally sourced lumber and recycled metal.

Power of 10

Case study: Nairobi, Kenya

The informal settlement of Kibera, in Nairobi, Kenya, is home to roughly 200,000 people. It is a place where public spaces are completely overlooked, with infrastructure that is shockingly inadequate to meet the needs of the people who live there. But there are exceptions, and the Silanga Sports Field is one of them.

This soccer field was formerly run down, polluted, and a magnet for crime. But a local group called the Kilimanjaro Initiative has been working steadily over the last few years to upgrade it. They have leveled the field so that it is fit to play on, improved the drainage system, and started programming the space with concerts and other events. As a result, the field has been transformed from a barren, unsafe waste space and is now a magnet for the community.

In order to make the space even more attractive and safe for Kibera's residents, PPS recently met on site with local residents and city council staff to brainstorm about how to create synergy and connections among the facilities already located here, including a primary school, a public toilet, a community garden, a playground, a river, a pottery studio, a meeting hall, and a resource center. The focus became less on the sports field and more on how to maximize the use and potential of all of the resources at Silanga Sports Field, to make it a true destination for the neighborhood, creating a ripple of positive effects. This is the Power of 10 at work.

Presenting recommendations at the Power of 10 workshop in Nairobi.

The Kibera Silanga sports field as it looks today.
Photo credit: Vanessa September

Create a Comprehensive Public Space Agenda

Case study: Bogotá, Colombia

The Colombian city of Bogotá is one where the divide between rich and poor had long been ingrained in the city's fabric, with many parts of the city suffering from economic and geographic isolation. Over the last 20 years, the city's leaders, notably former mayor Enrique Peñalosa, have embarked on a citywide campaign to use public space and transportation systems to bridge the social divide and create opportunity for all of Bogotá's citizens.

Central to the campaign has been the development of the TransMilenio bus rapid transit system, which provides fast, efficient, and reasonably priced public transportation to large areas of the city. Some 1.4 million people ride the system daily, and when it is completed there will be 388 kilometers of route, achieved at a fraction of the cost that an underground metro system would have cost. Another key aspect of the holistic approach that Bogotá has taken to its transformation is the Ciclovía. Each Sunday and on holidays, for several hours, most streets of the city are closed to cars so that people can enjoy biking, walking, and various recreational activities in the streets. These events have helped to raise awareness of the negative impact that car traffic has on people's lives, and have been a key part of the city's ongoing effort to regain street space for pedestrians and bicycles. City leaders also cracked down on sidewalk parking; pedestrianized Jimenez Avenue, the main street downtown; and introduced a system that restricted car use during rush hour.

Peñalosa also led an effort to increase green space and playing fields in neighborhoods around Bogotá. The result has been a decrease in crime and gang activity. Many citizens who were formerly without recreational options can now enjoy safe, healthy outdoor activities that are inclusive of women and children.

Ciclovía has reinvigorated Bogotá's city centre, increased safety, supported active living, and exercise, and created a stronger sense of community for Bogota's citizens. The bike routes traverse the rich and poor areas of the city alike.

Ciclovía spurred the pedestrianization of streets and the transformation of vacant lots into parks. This increased the amount and quality of public space in the city.

Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper: Start Small, Experiment

Case study: Gyrumi, Armenia

Gyrumi, Armenia is a city struck hard by a 1988 earthquake that left 25,000 people dead and 100,000 more without homes. In 2001, Aram Khachadurian, former PPS Chief Operating Officer, joined the Urban Institute to help build thousands of housing units for the displaced families, who were still living in temporary shelters in public spaces all over the city. With the success of this rehousing program, the central square was again available to the public, opening the way to plan its revitalization.

In July 2003, a grant from the Academy for Educational Development brought PPS to Gyumri to facilitate the first effort since the earthquake to recapture some of the civic life that had characterized this cultural center. Local project partners included the Urban Institute and a local steering committee of architects, planners, NGOs, and city officials. Despite fears that this public involvement effort would fail because, in Armenia's 6,000-year history, such participation has been virtually unknown, more than 70 people attended a daylong Placemaking workshop. The enthusiasm immediately sparked a cross-sector collaboration in the city on an unprecedented scale.

The result was the "New Gyumri Festival and Placemaking EXPO," which occurred just two months later. The people of Gyumri saw their square full of people (some 35,000) for the first time in anyone's memory.

Among the lengthy list of events and improvements were:

- a flower market, which has since become a regular bi-weekly event
- a roller-skating rink with new asphalt surfacing
- a giant chessboard made out of plywood by the local chess club
- seven cafés
- night lighting
- striping to direct traffic correctly
- an installation of new street furniture
- an art fair
- performances, dances, wrestling matches, gymnastics, and children's programs
- flower gardens planted by the church
- new banners and street signage
- daily TV news broadcasts

This catalytic event has been followed by more events on the square, and is part of a larger civic resurgence. Today, Gyrumi continues its recovery, with many officials well aware of the power of LQC interventions.

The site that housed refugees after the Armenian earthquake.

The site was used for a three-day festival of art, food, and experimentation which turned this long-neglected site into a vibrant central square.

Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper: Start Small, Experiment

Case study: Brno, Czech Republic

Many cities are confronted with the challenge of converting a historically valuable industrial property that is no longer used for its original purpose, and which represents an opportunity to bring in new uses. These factories capture people's imagination because they have flexible spaces that can potentially be used for many kinds of activities. However architecturally dramatic they may be, the size and scale of these spaces makes it difficult to find new uses for them.

In Brno, the Czech Republic, the Vankovka factory, with PPS assistance, was saved from demolition and designated an historic landmark. An NGO was set up to promote a community-based vision for the complex, an impressive series of industrial halls and loft spaces located adjacent to the historic city center. The NGO sponsored hundreds of events in the space, making temporary improvements to make the spaces usable. Based on the popular support, the city purchased the factory complex. The former factory is now a thriving shopping center and events venue, with shops, cafés, and restaurants -- a real destination for the city of Brno.

Vankovka factory before.

Vankovka factory after.

Restructure Government to Support Public Spaces

Case study: Mexico

In Mexico, SEDESOL, the Mexican Ministry of Social Development, has "rescued" 42,000 public spaces across the country in the past five years.
Rescue of Public Spaces is a program that promotes the realization of social actions and the execution of physical works to restore community meeting places, social interaction, and everyday recreation in insecure and marginalized urban areas.
The goals are to help improve the quality of life and safety through the revitalization of public spaces in cities and metropolitan areas across Mexico, thereby promoting healthy living.
Furthermore, the initiative is intended to link urban development to social development; promote community organization and participation; increase community safety and prevent antisocial activity; and help strengthen the sense of community belonging, social cohesion, and equitable relationships among genders.

In Mexico, the SEDESOL program is using an integrated approach toward creating safe, inclusive, and healthy public spaces by connecting all branches of government and improving communication with citizens.