

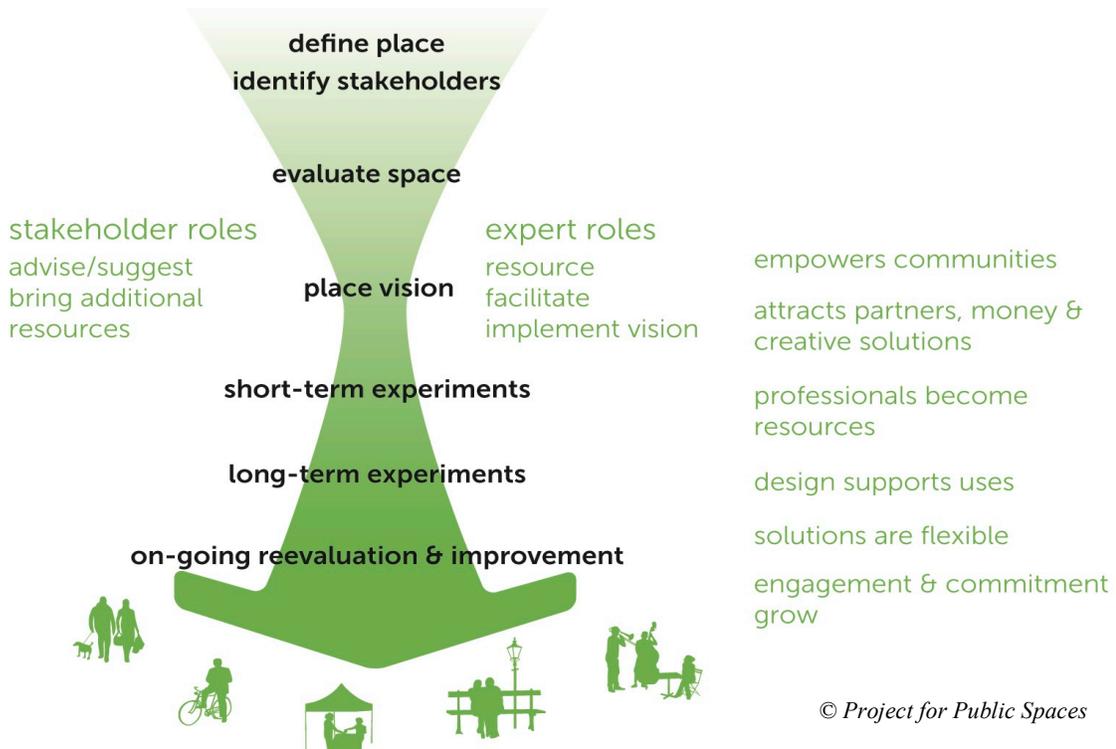
“Making it Happen” Placemaking Seminar
 Project for Public Spaces, New York
 October 23-25, 2013
 Attended by Sue Ellingson

Placemaking is planning for the outdoor areas between buildings. The goal is to create a place where people want to walk, relax, shop—and kiss (Fred Kent’s favorite indicator of a great place). Placemaking does not address whether a building is 3 or 5 or 100 stories, nor the uses of a building above the first floor. However, the first floors of surrounding buildings should engage pedestrians.

Planning for what people *do* in the space is more important than what it looks like. Hardscape elements (chairs, tables, vendors, play equipment, etc.) need to be designed to support and encourage the activities.

Placemakers are community organizers more than designers. The process looks like this:

Place/Community Driven Approach



“Define place,” at the top of the chart, is simply choosing where to work.

Identify Stakeholders

When I asked “Which stakeholders?” the most common response was, “We’ll take whoever we can get.” The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) team includes passersby, sometimes opening a kiosk for them to give input.

Fred Kent, PPS founder, has felt besieged by designers and traffic engineers who have goals other than engaging pedestrians. Compare two parks in Toronto, one very designed but empty, one created by neighbors and busy:



Toronto – Dufferin Grove, ©PPS



Toronto – Sherbourne Common, ©PPS

So, I understand the source of Fred’s #1 underlying principle: “The community is the expert.” However, my own experience with choosing stakeholders is much more fraught. Stakeholders who live nearby will often reject proposals that the wider community embraces.

Something to think about.

Evaluate Space

What makes a place great? PPS’s list of attributes is:

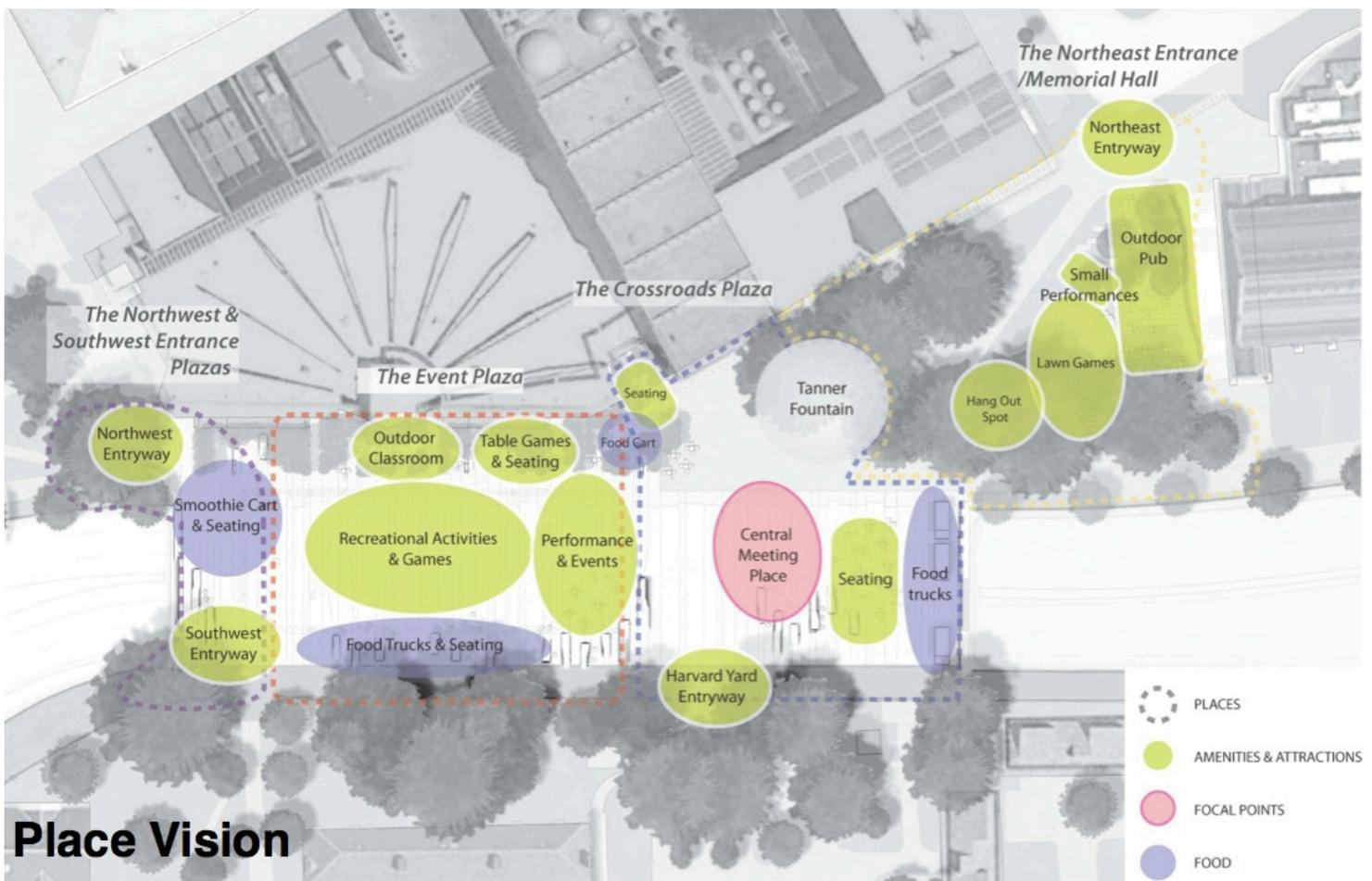
1. It is accessible and well-connected to other important places in the area.
2. The space is comfortable and projects a good image.
3. People are drawn to participate in activities there.
4. It is a sociable place where people like to gather, visiting it again and again.

They have also developed the Place Game, which is just a short questionnaire evaluating a space on the four criteria. See attached.

It's interesting to use the Place Game to evaluate places you know. Vilas Zoo, for example. It rates high on many of the criteria. Yet neighbors never hang out there, having coffee and bumping into other neighbors. It's a bit lacking in accessibility. But its main problem, perhaps, is that it only offers one activity/use, which is "going to the zoo." It doesn't have a place to hang out and have coffee. (And maybe this is fine; maybe a place doesn't have to be all things to all people.)

Place Vision

This is where designers come into play. PPS says, "Remember you are creating a place, not a design." When PPS designs a space, they plan at least ten activity areas ("the power of 10"). And they group uses together ("triangulation")—for example, a bench, trash receptacle, and coffee kiosk placed near a bus stop—to create synergy. Here is an example from Harvard:



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Short-Term, Long-Term Experiments

PPS promotes experimentation: trying out ideas first as inexpensive, temporary installations ("lighter, quicker, cheaper"). When it's clear what works, then move to more permanent installations.

"This might not strike you as an intellectual bombshell," William "Holly" Whyte liked to say, "but people like to sit where there are places for them to sit."

On my City website, Initiatives tab, I'll put up a PPS document about hardscape: seating, food, bus shelters, water features, waste cans, tents, lights, and signs. A few notes:

- Seating is especially important. People prefer movable chairs to fixed seating.
- If you want to seed a place with activity, put out food.
- Water features are expensive to maintain.

Regular programs also can be key to a successful place. Bryant Park in New York, the first and very successful placemaking effort, has yoga, movies, ping pong, a carousel, ice skating, a holiday market, etc. (Bryant Park is funded by the surrounding Business Improvement District.) Susan Schmitz has suggested programming for State St.

Maintenance and Reevaluation

You are never finished. Much of the success of any public space can be attributed to its management, both keeping a place orderly and having activities people enjoy.

"People in public spaces respond to thousands of subtle visual and aural cues, and successful places manipulate these cues (often without premeditation) to provide familiar assurances of comfort and well-being. The cues prompt a person who encounters a new place to predict a positive experience there—above all, that he will be safe. *The most important cues transmit a sense of order and social control.* And the best new or restored spaces...provide their patrons with the premonition of an enjoyable experience." says Andrew Manshel, PPS.

Manshel, who now works in the Jamaica area of New York, starts with flowers on the street.

Madison Placemaking

Placemaking has almost no formal role in Madison's city processes. Planning, Zoning, Engineering, and Traffic Engineering determine buildings, land use, and streets, but not the activities between buildings and streets. Neighborhood plans sometimes include placemaking, such as a bird walk in Hoyt Park. Parks plans many activities, but lacks the hardscape. Rebecca Cnare in Planning has become the City's de facto placemaking coordinator.

In my opinion, the City should:

- inventory Madison's best places (e.g., State St, Memorial Union terrace, Monroe St),
- develop a list of targeted areas to improve through placemaking, and
- develop criteria for when placemaking considerations should be included in design or planning of major projects (e.g., Monroe St reconstruction).

These tasks are difficult. "Place" and "placemaking" are hard to define.