

# Social factors in the design and evaluation of urban public spaces

# What Makes a Successful Place?

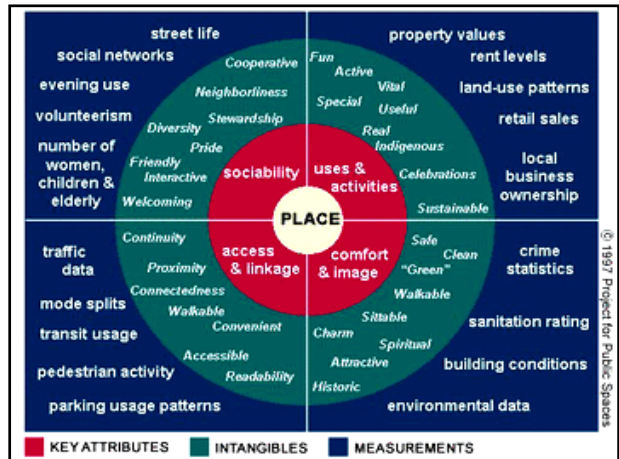
## Project for Public Spaces

[http://www.pps.org/topics/gps/gr\\_place\\_feat](http://www.pps.org/topics/gps/gr_place_feat)

# What Makes a Successful Place?

**Project for Public Spaces (PPS): 4 qualities:**

1. **accessible**
2. **people are engaged in activities there**
3. **comfortable & has a good image**
4. **sociable place:**  
where people meet each other  
take people when they visit



1. **Access & Linkage:** Walkable, Connectedness
2. **Uses & Activities:** Sustainable, Special, Active
3. **Comfort & Image:** Walkable, Safe, Clean, "Green", Attractive
4. **Sociability:** Welcoming, Stewardship

## What makes a successful place?

- **RED**: Key Attributes
- **GREEN**: Intangibles
- **BLUE**: Measurements

- **Central circle**: specific place you know: street corner, playground, plaza outside a building
- Evaluate according to 4 criteria in **red ring**:
  1. Access and linkage
  2. Uses and activities
  3. Comfort and image
  4. Sociability

- **ring outside**: intuitive or qualitative aspects to judge a place
- **Next outer ring**: quantitative aspects measured by statistics or research



## Access & Linkages

- judge by connections to surroundings (visual & physical)
- easy to get to & get through
- visible from a distance & up close
- **Edges** important: row of shops along a street: more interesting & generally safer to walk by than blank wall or empty lot
- high parking turnover
- convenient to public transit

## Access & Linkages Questions 1

1. See space from a distance?
2. Interior visible from outside?
3. Good connection between space & adjacent buildings: or surrounded by blank walls?
4. Occupants of adjacent buildings use space?
5. People easily walk to place?
6. Footpaths lead to & from adjacent areas?
7. People with special needs?

## Access & Linkages Questions 2

8. Roads & paths through space take people where they actually want to go?
9. Variety of transportation options - bus train, car, bicycle, etc. to reach place?
10. Transit stops conveniently located next to destinations: libraries, post offices, park entrances, etc.?

## Comfort & Image

1. **Key:** whether a space is comfortable & presents itself well - has a good image
2. Comfort includes perceptions about:
  - Safety
  - Cleanliness
  - Places to sit
3. choice to sit where they want generally underestimated
4. Women good judges on comfort & image: discriminating about public spaces they use

## Questions on Comfort & Image 1

1. *Does place make a good first impression?*
2. *More women than men?*
3. *Enough places to sit?*
4. *Seats conveniently located?*
5. *Choice of places to sit, either in sun or shade?*
6. *Spaces clean & free of litter?*
7. *Who is responsible for maintenance?*

## Questions on Comfort & Image 2

8. *What do they do? When?*
9. *Area feel safe? Security presence?*
10. *If so, what do these people do? When are they on duty?*
11. *People taking photos?*
12. *Many photo opportunities available?*
13. *Vehicles dominate pedestrian use of space or prevent them from easily getting to space?*

## Uses & Activities

- **Basic building blocks of a place**
- **Having something to do: reason to come to a place & return**
- **When there is nothing to do: space will be empty**
- **Generally means something is wrong**

## Principles to keep in mind in evaluating uses & activities 1

1. More activities going & that people have an opportunity to participate in, the better
2. Good balance between men & women
3. People of different ages using space (retired people & people with young children can use a space during day when others are working)

## Principles to keep in mind in evaluating uses & activities 2

4. Space is used throughout day
5. Space used by both singles & people in groups is better than one just used by people alone:
  - places for people to sit with friends
  - more socializing
  - more fun
6. Ultimate success of a space: how well it is managed

## Questions on Uses & Activities 1

1. Are people using space or is it empty?
2. Used by people of different ages?
3. Are people in groups?
4. How many different types of activities are occurring: people walking, eating, playing ball, chess, relaxing, reading?

## Questions on Uses & Activities 2

5. Which parts of space are used & which are not?
6. Choices of things to do?
7. Management presence?
8. Identify anyone in charge of space?

## Sociability

- difficult quality to achieve
- once attained: unmistakable feature
- When people see friends, meet & greet neighbours & feel comfortable interacting with strangers = tend to feel stronger sense of place or attachment to their community
- ... & to place that fosters these types of social activities

## Questions on Sociability 1

1. Is this a place you would choose to meet your friends? Are others meeting friends here or running into them?
2. Are people in groups? Are they talking with one another?
3. Do people seem to know each other by face or by name?
4. Do people bring their friends & relatives to see place or do they point to one of its features with pride?

## Questions on Sociability 2

5. Are people smiling?
6. Do people make eye contact?
7. Do people use this place regularly & by choice?
8. Mix of ages & ethnic groups that generally reflect community at large?
9. Do people tend to pick up litter when they see it?

# Common Themes in Good Public Places

## Good Public Spaces

- **Responsive:** designed & managed to serve needs of their users
- **Democratic:** accessible to all groups & providing freedom of action
- **Meaningful:** allowing people to make strong connections between place, their personal lives & larger world

*Carr et al., eds, Public Space, 1992:19-20*

### Public places should be:

1. **Accessible** to everyone (including children, people with a disability & older people)
2. **Clear:** Conveys clear, appropriate, user-friendly messages
3. **Beautiful:** enhances health & emotional well-being of its users
4. **Safe:** Provide a feeling of security & safety
5. **Culturally appropriate**
6. **For all:** Encourage use by different users, without any one group's activities disrupting other's enjoyment
7. **Comfortable,** in regard to sun, shade, wind, etc.
8. **Ownership:** Encourages community ownership & caring through involvement in design, construction and/ or maintenance

From *People Places*, 1998.



### Urban spaces need to be accessible to all users



### Most important conclusion:

"...while spaces are inequitably distributed & used differently, people seem to **value** similar qualities in outdoor space... they value clean air, trees, natural landscapes, places that make them feel better, safe places for their children to play, & places to walk & sit outside."

Clare Cooper Marcus & Carolyn Francis, *People Places*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1998: 89 citing a study of Seattle's open spaces by Tuttle, 1996

### Contemporary Privatization of Life

- Specialization & fragmentation..
- Makes obsolete function of central public space?
- But what about:
  - Faneuil Hall, Boston?
  - Harbor Place, Baltimore?
- indicate lively interest in public life
- Nostalgia for public life



Does contemporary specialization & privatization of life make obsolete the function of a central public space?

- Commodification of spaces
- What is private?
- What is public?
- Who is excluded?



## Public Spaces for Whom?

- Homeless people expected to leave public areas
- Make homeless & elderly users less visible
- "Day-long living room" for those who have no homes or who live alone



*People Places, 1998: 4*

What happens when these basics are ignored...

Why research & care are important...



"The Black Hole", Sydney



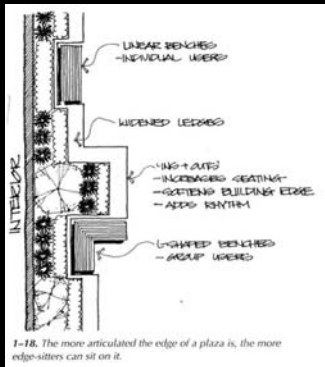
## Some general principles: public open spaces as 'people places'

## 'People Places'

- Easily accessible to & can be seen by potential users
- Clearly convey message that place is available for use & is meant to be used
- Beautiful & engaging on outside & inside

## 'People Places'

- Furnished to support most likely & desirable activities, especially with **comfortable seating**
- Feeling of security & safety to potential users
- Designed for user groups most likely to use space



## Widely accessible

- Encourage use by different subgroups of resident population
- No group disrupts another's use & enjoyment
- Environment physiologically comfortable at peak times
- Accessible to:
  - children
  - older people
  - people with a disability

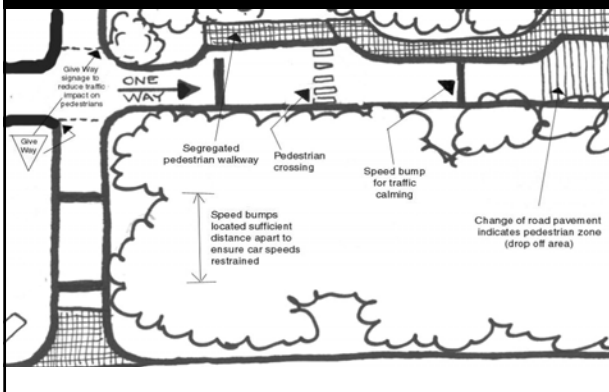


## Programming

- Support intended programs or activities
- Incorporate elements users can add to, change or personalise
- Allow for attachment to & maintenance of space by users (especially residents)

## Safety & CPTED

## Pedestrian safety



## Cultural difference & park use

- Typical American park unknown in China & Taiwan
- Most Chinese would find them:
  - Too structured
  - Poorly landscaped



*People Places, 1998: 89*

## How different income groups use & value public open space

- Seattle study, 1996 (Tuttle 1996, in *People Places*, 1998: 89)
- High-income people: with private yards use their yards
- Also go to other neighbourhood spaces

## How different income groups use & value public open space

### Low-income people:

- People with private yards report these are only outdoor spaces they use in their neighbourhood
- Leave their neighbourhoods & use spaces in high-income neighbourhoods where possible
- Low-income **women** most circumscribed

## All income groups value:

- Trees
- Clean air
- Natural landscapes
- Places that make them feel better
- Safe places for children's play
- Places to walk & sit outside

### Other studies:

no differences in open space values based on race, gender or class

## Coming to the Park with Others

Central Perth study with Jan Gehl, 1993:

people came to the plaza in threesomes





Meeting a person  
who has not been there before...



# Plazas

## Plazas

### *Working definition:*

*"a mostly hard-surfaced outdoor public space from which cars are excluded"*

- Public spaces which draw people together for passive enjoyment

*Typically:* paved areas, enclosed by high-density structures

### *Typically:*

- windy, barren wastelands
- do not contain features that facilitate intended activities

## Urban Plazas

- People getting in to "public" habit
- Clientele growing
- Jan Gehl's triumphs in Copenhagen



## Main functions of plazas

- strolling, sitting, eating & watching world go by
- Unlike a footpath: a place in its own right
- Not just a place people pass through

## The Urban Oasis or the Grand Public Space

- Located near a diversity of land uses
- Tends to attract users from a greater distance & in greater variety than do other open spaces
- Big & flexible enough for:
  - lunch crowds
  - outdoor cafés
  - passers-through
  - occasional concerts, art shows, exhibits
  - rallies



## Plazas: a gendered landscape...

*"Women are more discriminating than men as to where they will sit, more sensitive to annoyances, & women spend more time casting the various possibilities. If a plaza has a markedly lower than average proportion of women, something is wrong.*

*When there is a higher than average proportion of women the plaza is probably a good one & has been chosen as such."*

William Whyte, 1980: 18

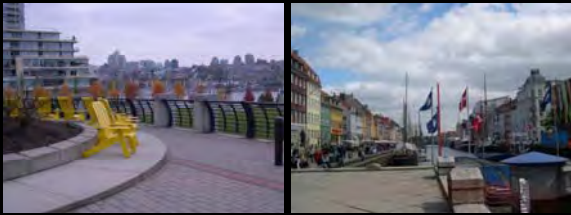
## Frontstage & Backstage Users

- **Men & women:** totally different concepts of downtown space & what they seek from it
- Women seek "**Backyard experience**":
  - Relief from urban stress & office environment
  - Prefer to spend time in natural environments
  - Seek secure spaces
  - Spaces that filter out urban stimuli
  - Comfort, relief, security, control, relaxation

## Frontstage & Backstage Users

Men prefer: "frontyard" experiences

- Publicness
- Social interaction
- Involvement



## General considerations for plaza design

- Locate within easy walking distance of public transport systems (400 m level walk preferred)
- Determine precisely which functions plaza is designed to support
- Consider microclimate conditions



## Plaza size

### Comfortable dimensions:

- no wider than 100 metres
- minimum width: 25 to 70 metres

## Visual complexity

Design incorporates a wide variety of forms, colours, textures:

- different places to sit
- fountains
- sculptures
- nooks & corners
- plants & shrubs
- accessible changes in level

## Uses & activities

Encourage people to stop & linger:

- dense landscaping
- furnishing
- attractive focal elements
- defined edges

Take care with landscaping design:

- CPTED problems not inadvertently introduced

## Accommodate:

- shortcuts through plaza without violating privacy of any units or private (or shared) open space
- concerts or other open-air events: unimpeded open areas for seating
- heavy use & minimise vandalism without 'hardening' design



## Microclimate

- design for year-round use
- locate to receive year-round sunshine
- Summer shade: canopies, trellises & vegetation
- control building height & mass: ensure solar access
- calculate sun-shade patterns
- provide protection for lunchtime users, especially summer
- glare from adjacent buildings or structures: not detract from plaza's amenities



## Subspaces

- Divide larger plazas into subspaces with a variety of uses
- Features define subspaces:
  - planting
  - accessible level changes
  - seating arrangements
- large enough so users will not feel they are intruding into a space if someone is already using it
- a person sitting there alone will not feel uncomfortable or unsafe

## Plaza Circulation & Paving

- encumbered & older people & people with a disability
- stairs run parallel to ramps wherever possible
- paving material changes signify transitions from footpaths to plazas without discouraging entry



## Level changes

- Use level changes with care
- Do not impede access for people with a disability, prams & pushers,
- Level changes to achieve:
  - creation of subareas
  - separation of seating & circulation areas
  - features within subareas



## Plaza Seating

(rules of thumb...)

- Most important element in encouraging plaza use
- Determine:
  - one metre of seating for 30 square metres of plaza
  - or
  - one linear metre per each linear metre of plaza perimeter
- Accommodate various types of users



## Plaza Seating

Accommodate:

- **sociofugal** arrangements (people looking outwards, being separate & not interacting)
- and
- **sociopetal** seating (for conversation & interaction):
    - some benches paired at right angles
    - some groups to encourage conversation
    - some isolated benches
    - choices between sunny & shady locations



# Plaza Seating Orientations

## Variety of seating orientations:

- water views
- distant views of City
- watching world go by
- supervising children
- watching entertainers
- Some comfortable benches for older people & people with a disability



## In-class Assignment:

1. Rate the current places according to the criteria presented in this lecture
2. Address the key social issues you need to tackle in your urban design:

1. Accessibility
2. Activities
3. Comfort and image
4. A sociable place



Thank you.

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