CYNTHIA L. KEMPER

Fred Kent: Public-Space Provocateur

As an internationally known advocate for public places, Fred Kent, cofounder of the New York–based Project for Public Spaces (PPS), sees cities—and the people who inhabit them—through the measured senses of an urban provocateur.

The Project for Public Spaces (PPS), founded as a nonprofit group in 1975, was inspired by the pioneering Street Life Project of writer-sociologist William H. Whyte (author of *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*). Over the last 30 years, the group's concepts and skills have been applied in more than 1,500 communities in 47 American states and 24 countries. Driven by the determination to transform the streets, parks, markets, transit stations, libraries, and other environs of the world into vibrant and popular spaces, PPS and its cofounder Fred Kent have significantly influenced the way global cities and neighborhoods think about and approach public space design.

After the group gained international acclaim in the early 1980s for its role in reviving New York's Bryant Park—once a derelict space overrun with drug dealers—PPS has worked on projects like the redevelopment of High Street in Oxford, England; Alexanderplatz Square in East Berlin, Germany; and Times Square in Manhattan (a collaboration with George Lucas's LucasArts Attractions). In addition, PPS worked on reimagining the New Jersey transit facilities and New York's Port Authority Bus Terminal as new variations on the town center.

In 1994, while researching its publication *The Role of Transit in Creating Livable Metropolitan Communities*, PPS introduced the idea of place making as a method to ensure that transit planning better meets community needs. It has since developed a unique process for transforming public spaces, and officially has coined the term *place making* as the name of the process.

Over the last decade, PPS has developed numerous projects promoting public space, including a new model for America's public libraries, emphasizing their potential as civic gathering spaces and catalysts for downtown revival; the Urban Parks Institute; and the Transportation and Livable Communities Consortium. Currently, PPS is working with the General Services Administration (GSA) on a landmark, nationwide effort to create safe, attractive, people-friendly public spaces around courthouses, government offices, and other federal buildings. One of PPS's most notable place-making successes is Michigan's new Campus Martius Park, the centerpiece of Detroit's downtown renaissance.

The following is excerpted from a recent interview with Kent.

People are looking for ways to involve themselves in their communities. They seek gathering places, more connections with the sources of food and other products they need, and the ability to walk and to ride bicycles. What is catalyzing this shift, and how do you see it affecting the city planning process in the future?

Our urban areas are coming full circle. Over the last 100 years, we got off track. For centuries, we had compact urban centers. Then, industrialization and pollution made cities so unpleasant that suburbs gained enormous traction—and we started designing cities like suburbs. People are intuitively realizing on a massive scale that we went too far in suburbanizing our cities. Now, we want to be urban again, to recapture not just the convenience and pleasure of city life, but to experience a real sense of community. That means planning a different role for cars, it means public markets are important, and it means public gathering places should again be the building blocks of cities and towns.

How do you define *place making*?

We recently asked our E-mail newsletter recipients how they would define place making and we got 800 responses. Here's one of my favorites: "Thoreau once said, 'There is no value in life except what you choose to place upon it and no happiness in any place except what you bring to it yourself.' In this light, place making becomes a dynamic human function: it is an act of liberation, of staking claim, and of beautification; it is true human empowerment." Many other people sounded this theme—that place making has to be done respectfully if we are to build communities we want to live in.

At PPS, we believe place making is an intensely human activity that naturally involves people of all ages, incomes, and cultures. The community itself must to be the driving force in creating a vision for making a place. Then, planners and designers can help the community turn the vision into a reality.

On the PPS Web site, Casey Stengel is quoted as saying: "I always heard it couldn't be done, but sometimes that don't work out." What "can't be done" that PPS is determined to do? And what drives you personally to do this work?

There are so many narrowly conceived regulations that get in the way of creating great public spaces today. It's as though common sense has little or no place in planning or development anymore. Even something as simple as installing a stop sign at a dangerous intersection won't get done unless someone is seriously injured or dies there. The upshot is that people feel paralyzed because they do not know how to navigate the process of making change in their community. Public officials may reinforce this sense of

helplessness because they are comfortable with the status quo. They may say, for example, that traffic "calming" or sidewalk "vending" cannot be done, when what they really mean is that they have never done things that way before.

When we work on a project, we like to suggest establishing a "bureaucracy-free zone," for a period of, say, six months, so a community can experiment with small-scale improvements and then rewrite the rules to allow their place-making effort to flourish. We are determined to help people overcome barriers to creating the places they want in their own communities. Just seeing how much joy people get from being in great places is the most powerful motivation you could ask for.

You report that PPS's work to rejuvenate New Jersey Transit train stations led to a 40 percent increase in ridership at the historic Netherwood Station in Plainfield, New Jersey. This spurred further investment in the adjacent business district. Can you explain the factors that catalyzed these changes, and why your work had such a huge impact?

By making the street easier to cross, slowing traffic, restoring the train station to its original beauty, adding streetscape amenities, and persuading the merchants association to work with other business owners to make facade and signage improvements, the city of Plainfield, New Jersey, provided an excellent location that it could market to attract new businesses to the town center. Which it did.

The Ford Foundation invited PPS to study and promote public markets as vehicles for economic development and social integration. Can you share a few of your most compelling findings?

In our national study of eight public and farmers markets, we learned that over half the vendors surveyed spent less than $1,000 to open their businesses. Where else can you do this so cheaply? Also, when public and farmers market customers were asked: "What is the greatest benefit of a market to the community?" the answer most often given was: "It brings people together." Thus, place making and social components are key to the success of community markets and their economic effectiveness as well. Markets are great engines of entrepreneurship, and they rehumanize our communities—they are a counterbalance to the Wal-Marts of today.

You state, "We have enormous respect for the landscape architecture profession, but we feel that the profession is severely off track. Parks, plazas, and squares succeed when people come first, not design. . . . When you focus on place, you do everything differently." In many cases, the PPS approach, in your words, runs "against the deeply ingrained habits of most design professionals, traffic engineers, developers, and public policy makers." This is a strong statement. Can you explain why you disagree with design and planning professionals and how, in your view, they could be more effective?

A very wise man once told me, "Each discipline has become its own audience." This is not true of every architect or landscape architect, but it certainly applies to the upper echelons who grab all the accolades and the media attention. These design professionals give awards to themselves for an aesthetic that is mostly concerned with defining individual designers' brands. It's a travesty. We need great design, but we also need to change our criteria for success. Do people use these public spaces? Are these spaces comfortable to use? Do people feel safe there? These are the concerns of people in the communities where buildings and landscape objects are placed. But too many projects are given awards by other designers and lauded by design critics—with no questions asked about what the community thinks or about the impact on the people who use these places the most.

Another of your statements, "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. Great downtowns fill cities with life. PPS helps spark revitalization by finding ways for this vitality to emerge." How does PPS's place-making process differ from the typical master-planning process?

Master planning tends to focus on narrowly defined objectives—how to move more traffic or spur more development. It does not start with the community, or with the places that are important to people. Place making is about people, and getting them proactively involved in creating a place. It relies on the fact that the people who use a place are the real experts. They know the history. They know what the main problems are, and they can be partners, if asked, in making that place better. If you start with a broad objective—like creating ten good destinations in a city or neighborhood—you frame the process so that nonexperts in the community can take the lead, which will affect dramatically the image and livability of that community. Place making sets the stage for a very different kind of planning that builds communities around local assets, nurtures local identity, and fosters an environment of entrepreneurship and collaboration. It is about creating human and social capital.

You identify the qualities of a successful place as follows: "Is the place comfortable, does it have a good image, does it have appropriate activities and uses, is it accessible, and is it sociable?" Can these qualities be planned or determined before spaces are completed? If so, and by using Denver's Union Station as an example, can you explain how you would plan for these qualities in the final product?

Denver's Union Station is probably the boldest transportation project in the United States today. [See "It Takes a Station," page 110.] By having all transportation activity take place within the station—including pickup and delivery of passengers by taxi and autos—the building can face a square that acts as the "front porch" of the city. Instead of having every type of vehicle dominating the city's public

realm, a single great destination can bring you right to the heart of Denver's civic life. You can use Union Station as a gateway, or as your destination. And since the community has a strong vision of what should happen in that destination, you can determine the kinds of activities and uses that would appeal to local residents—using these activities as the basis for designing the square. The program can be incorporated into the design as the project proceeds, rather than added as an afterthought. From the beginning, the station square will serve many audiences during all times of day, and transit will become the mode of choice to get to that part of downtown Denver. A big and bold idea. **UL**

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For more information about the Project for Public Spaces, visit PPS's Web site at: www.pps.org.