

CIVIC BUILDINGS AND THEIR PUBLIC SPACES CAN IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN CITIES



CYNTHIA NIKITIN IS VICE PRESIDENT FOR PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND DOWNTOWNS AT THE PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES INC. IN NEW YORK. SHE HAS EARNED A REPUTATION AS A PERSUASIVE ADVOCATE FOR “PLACEMAKING” AS AN APPROACH TO CITY PLANNING AND URBAN DESIGN AND HAS MANAGED LARGE-SCALE AND COMPLEX PROJECTS. CYNTHIA HAS A BACHELOR OF ARTS IN ART HISTORY AND COMPARATIVE POLITICS FROM CLARK UNIVERSITY AND A MASTERS IN ARTS MANAGEMENT AND URBAN PLANNING FROM NEW YORK UNIVERSITY.



Chess in public spaces

Civic institutions, such as parks, libraries, city halls and cultural facilities, are the foundations of a civil society and the cornerstones of democracy.

At their best, they nurture and define a community’s identity by instilling a greater sense of pride, they foster frequent and meaningful contact between citizens, they provide comfort in their

public spaces and they encourage an increasingly diverse population to use them. When civic institutions are located in places that are easily accessible by pedestrians and transit, they help to make a city more walkable and reduce dependence on the automobile. Civic institutions can also help to support and build local economies by encouraging small-scale businesses and local entrepreneurship through vending programs, farmers’ markets, festivals and other locally-sponsored activities.

At one time, civic institutions and the spaces around them were some of the most vital places in cities. Courthouses were built next to public markets because the marketplace was where members of the community came together regularly – to conduct business, settle disagreements and socialize. Theatres and opera houses were located inside of city halls. And civic squares functioned as gathering places for all types of celebrations. But the idea of civic engagement taking place in and around institutions has fallen out of favor for a number of reasons. These include bureaucracy, safety and security concerns, designs that preclude public use, a lack of collaborative management strategies, and inadequate public funding. Furthermore, many civic institutions continue to be designed and located as stand-alone, isolated facilities, reachable only by those with automobiles. Because of this, they have ceased to perform their important role in our society.

However, our community centres, libraries, museums, community colleges, hospitals, religious institutions and the streets and public spaces that surround them all have the potential to once again anchor communities, bringing them together both physically and symbolically by providing resources, gathering places and forums for open communication.

By working together and pooling their unique strengths and areas of expertise, these institutions and the communities around them can identify their true potential to better serve the public by tackling common challenges. For example, when local health providers were trying to connect with the population of elderly Chinese in Richmond to pass along information about diabetes care and prevention, they partnered with the Brighthouse Branch Library. Now, health care professionals hold these sessions at the library in conjunction with the Chinese Calligraphy class, both of which reach a large sector of this target population. Elsewhere, we see the potential for parks and plazas to act as key resources for libraries, providing venues where a wide range of learning, educational and recreational activities can take place. Civic institutions such as libraries and parks departments can work together to create places where active living and active learning can happen, helping to define their respective roles as community builders. In New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, RCMP officers run the youth literacy program at the local library. The officer in charge of the program believes that encouraging young people to learn to read is one way of preventing them from becoming juvenile offenders. For its part, the library is assuming management and programming responsibilities for a nearby park and has created an outdoor reading room with Wi-Fi connectivity. Another location where library services are being combined with a

WORKING TOGETHER

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local park is in Regina, where the city's main library has incorporated the idea into its expansion plans. Making the park an extension of the library has reduced capital construction requirements.

In order to once again take bold leadership roles within the communities they serve, civic institutions need to develop new audiences, attractions and ideas for how the spaces around them can be used. They can introduce the idea of "placemaking" (the practice of encouraging local residents to contribute to the betterment of their community's public spaces) not only into their programming, planning and facility management activities, but also as an approach to neighbourhood revitalization where civic anchors and public spaces can be powerful catalysts.

the need to find partners becomes paramount to their survival. Cities will also have to think differently about their civic buildings and public spaces. They will need to reassert these assets as the cornerstones of communities and the creators of vital public spaces. Being active and engaged partners with private and other public-sector interests will help them fully maximize and leverage the ability of their facilities to serve the community.

Some of the issues that cities can begin to think about in leveraging their civic buildings and adjacent spaces include:

- Working with local residents and stakeholders to come up with ideas to maximize the utilization of existing public sector resources (libraries, schools, museums, City Halls, etc.)
- Reconceptualizing civic buildings as public spaces and providing innovative programming
- Encouraging and engaging in cooperative planning around shared resources among diverse institutions (also known as cooperative resource planning)
- Forming partnerships with other civic institutions to boost local economies (i.e. marketing and promotion strategies for downtown), maximize existing resources, and achieve beneficial community outcomes and improved communication and interaction
- Looking for temporary uses and short-term activities for institutions to meet the diverse needs of the community while capital funding is scarce

What's important is that these new partnerships and ways of thinking about public resources provide a holistic and creative new definition of the term "sustainable". Working together helps us develop flexible neighborhood places that may be used for a variety of functions to improve quality of life for years to come.



Exercise in downtown square; Mississauga, On.

But civic institutions need partners (such as other public agencies, non-profit organizations and even the private sector) to achieve their goals. As sources of capital funding diminish in the economic downturn,