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## **SHARED WISDOM: Preaching the Gospel of Place**

Fred Kent of the Project for Public Spaces urges landscape architects to create "people places."

By Susan Hines

At 58, Fred Kent has been in the business of placemaking for more than 27 years. He and his nonprofit firm, the Project for Public Spaces (PPS), created the conceptual plan for the revitalized Bryant Park in New York City and made the popular Court Street Community Square from a parking lot at the heart of San Bernardino, California. On a smaller scale, PPS transformed a New Haven, Connecticut, street corner at the behest of a local business owner. By widening sidewalks in front to accommodate cafe seating and making the rear parking lot more attractive and welcoming, PPS not only transformed a corner but also helped turn a neighborhood around.

Through publications and training sessions, PPS freely shares placemaking strategies acquired over the decades. Ten thousand people attend its workshops annually, usually on the students' home ground. In addition to conducting visioning programs for cities and towns all over the globe, PPS serves as a resource to the General Services Administration (GSA). As well as reviewing new construction, PPS offers technical assistance to GSA to help the agency integrate the public spaces around existing federal buildings into the surrounding communities. The group trained 300 GSA employees this past summer and developed a now-required course in context-sensitive design for the New Jersey Department of Transportation. The Neighborhood Reinvestment Training Institute also relies on PPS training services.

Yet Kent is neither a landscape architect nor an architect. Far from seeing this as a disadvantage, Kent credits his ignorance of design disciplines as a major factor in the success of PPS.

Kent also acknowledges the work of his mentor, William H. Whyte. PPS was founded in 1975 to apply the urban-space theories that Whyte developed in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. An editor at Fortune Magazine, Whyte first became well-known in 1956 as the author of the best-selling social critique *The Organization Man*. Although there his focus was the decline of individualism and the rise of a corporate social ethic, he called the "new suburbia, the packaged villages that have become the dormitory of the new generation" a "preview" of the dystopia ultimately to be wrought by *Organization Man*.

Shortly thereafter, Whyte shifted his focus to the urban environment, spending the second half of his career observing and documenting how people act and interact in public spaces. He was among the first to point out, for example, that how active a place is-not the kinds of people who congregate there-determines the safety and security of an environment. The now classic *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, published in 1980, laid out conclusions based on decades of meticulous observation and documentation of human behavior in the urban environment through the Street Life Project that Whyte founded.

A research assistant on the Street Life Project in the early 1970s, PPS founder and president Kent was thoroughly grounded in Whyte's philosophy and his methods of observation and film analysis. PPS staff often quote the master's statement that the city street is "the river of life...where we come together, the pathway to the center. It is the primary place." They are true believers in common sense and the ability of ordinary people to create meaningful spaces for themselves. To this day, Whyte's research and philosophy form the core of the PPS approach. Kent and his partner, Kathy Madden, guide the project and its 25 employees-some of whom are designers, architects, landscape architects, and planners-in an all-out effort to build the kinds of vibrant places Whyte documented and praised.

Trained in geography, economics, anthropology, and planning, Kent studied at Columbia for years without taking an advanced degree. He calls himself "the dumbest person" at PPS. "I don't have any of the skills that the other people have. I'm more influenced by normal human beings." In addition to Whyte, one of the people who most influenced Kent was Margaret Mead. He characterizes the famous anthropologist as "a very normal wise person who did not have a respect for academia. She had respect for common sense."

Kent's formative encounters with Whyte and Mead combined with early recognition of the importance of place to happiness and human flourishing. Memories of growing up enjoying the "enormous freedom and naive liberalism" of small-town Andover, Massachusetts, clashed with equally strong and very negative feelings about West Hartford, Connecticut, where he moved as a teenager. West Hartford was a far more segregated and restrictive environment. Kent never really felt comfortable again until he arrived in New York City to start undergraduate work at Columbia University.

Last year, Kent logged his customary 150,000 travel miles as PPS trained federal and state government employees and ordinary citizens in placemaking. Seventy-five communities received assistance from PPS in building stronger social bonds through creating public spaces that work.

Few of the trainees were landscape architects, however, a factor Kent finds incredibly frustrating. "You are so important-you could be the transformer of cities," he tells landscape architects. "It's hard to be critical in a constructive way, but if landscape architects became synthesizers, and facilitators, and community resources they would become so much more important."

According to Kent, the design professions promote form over function, ignoring what great places are all about, namely "creating interaction and building community. Architects and landscape architects take pictures of projects without people in them when the primary thing ought to be connecting people in the public places and then designing to support that. That is not done in the profession."

Places without people are the antithesis of Kent's working environment in the heart of New York City's Greenwich Village. Both the office and the surrounding neighborhood are bustling with people, places, and things. Most important, they mix, overflow onto one another, in that small-town way that compels lipstick application prior to leaving home. You just don't know whom you might run into.

Follow Fred into a local restaurant. He nods familiarly to the wait-staff and stops by a table of people he knows. Later, a PPS employee lunching with his cousin approaches to chat. It is the number of these consistent, but casual, encounters that makes or breaks a place, as far as Kent is concerned. Yet, few contemporary environments, urban or suburban, nurture the "meet and greet" experience that connects people to each other and to place. As far as Kent is concerned, many newly designed spaces work against such interaction.

"According to designers, the success of a place all ties into the whole idea that things must be visual," Kent says. "What people really want is to reengage in the communities in which they live. Unfortunately, we have designed that out, and the landscape architecture profession is as guilty of that as the traffic engineers."

Kent has strong words for a profession he sees as overly occupied with aesthetics. "Landscape architects need to start from a completely different point of view. They need to start from the idea that their job is to build communities, support community activity, and create places in the community that are special to those people—all that work is geared toward serving the community and not the profession. They should start out saying, 'My job is to build community, connect people in this community, and create special places that people will care for.'"

Kent has become skeptical that landscape architects wish to design for community interaction. A recent experience working with landscape architects on a Cleveland city park underscored the problem PPS has in communicating its philosophy to the profession. After a series of community meetings, the public generated ideas for connecting small destinations within the space. Instead of taking its cue from the public wish list and designing pathways to connect these places, the firm planned a huge oval path that reinforced the park's name but, according to Kent, "completely ignored the natural ways people would move from place to place in the park. Landscape architects need to be released from having to do shapes, forms, and metaphors and instead focus on understanding human interactivity and managing uses—from flowers to playgrounds and markets. This means taking on more skills and responsibility, but if landscape architects continue to focus strictly on design skills, they may end up without a profession."

"So many cities don't want parks now," he goes on to say, "because parks are just these visual flat things. They don't attract people," he notes. "So then [landscape architects] do their schtick of the form, the shape, and the metaphor."

It is hard to define, but we all know a good place when we see it—a sidewalk cafe near a subway stop, a spot of downtown greenspace that beckons office and construction workers at lunchtime, the street that becomes a farmers' market every Sunday. According to PPS, a "place" is created when sociability, multiple activities, and use intersect with comfort, image, and access. While these are the "key attributes," various intangibles—charm, proximity, diversity, and amusements—also exert an important influence. It is not all touchy-feely, though. PPS points out that measurable factors like traffic data, crime statistics, and property values contribute to place. So, too, do the number of women, children, and elderly people gathered in one spot. This mental calculus we all perform, consciously or not, every time we enter a space.

How to do this? Kent gives one example. "Triangulation and layering are key when you are trying to make a place." Asked to define those terms, Kent offers, "There is something that goes on if you take a playground, a children's reading room in a library, a coffee shop, and a laundromat, and put them all together near a bus stop. Then people make connections. The amount of communication between people who don't know each other, and chance encounters between people who do know each other, creates such an amazing synergy. But nowhere in America do we do that, and the one profession that should be thinking about it is off thinking about forms and shapes and metaphors." In addition to placing the community at the center of the process, PPS calls on citizens and designers not only to embrace the idea of place but also to expand concepts of stakeholders to include potential users, people on the fringes of the space, government agencies and, especially, "zealous nuts." "Where would Central Park be without the Central Park Conservancy's passionate Betsy Barlow Rogers?" Kent asks.

PPS notes that public areas often have to be retrofitted to make functional places from merely beautiful spaces. The firm's principles encourage mixed-use development and triangulation on the tiniest scale- placing a trash can, a telephone, and a bench at the entrance to a park, for example. "It's not an expensive proposition," Kent maintains. In fact PPS regularly advocates quick and dirty fixes-like paint and petunias-encouraging signals that something is afoot.

"No one pulls together these focal points where human interaction occurs," he complains, "and that's what I think community building is about." Making reference to the project's training in context-sensitive design for the New Jersey Department of Transportation, Kent describes converting state traffic engineers to placemakers. "We have been training all these traffic engineers to create places. They love the idea. There is no resistance. Heretofore, they have just been moving cars faster through a given place. But now, they have this mandate to create places, and they want to know what the community's vision for these places is and how they can serve and support that vision." He laughs, "They are enjoying their job all of a sudden. But to me, the ones who should have been doing this all along are the landscape professionals."

Reminded that some landscape architects have championed smart and sustainable growth and a range of other people-oriented policies for years, Kent relents a little and comes up with an interesting version of the 80:20 split. "I think probably 80 percent of the profession would like to create meaningful places, and 20 percent are defining where the profession goes-and they are the wrong people. Awards aren't given to the sensitive majority, and that's where they should go," he argues. Nor does he let the most prestigious designers off the hook. "The big firms are the worst firms for building good places-you can absolutely quote me on that."

Kent has not given up on landscape architects, however. "I think if you unleashed the landscape architecture profession and they became place creators and community builders, you could solve many of this country's problems, including problems of isolation of people in communities. You could solve sprawl problems, because people would want to stay in and maintain neighborhoods close to these spaces. So, I think the profession is on the wrong road. We know that if you started rewarding people who create good places-places that were judged by people in the community to be successful-then a strong portion of the profession would gravitate in that direction very easily."

Special places. Maximizing communication. Creating a stage for a variety of experiences. Minimizing sprawl. These buzzwords leap from the pages of snazzy firm brochures. Certainly, they are concepts landscape architects are familiar with and use constantly in their communications with each other and the outside world. Kent seems to be asking if landscape architects are putting these sentiments into practice. Can landscape architects walk the walk as well as they talk the talk? Fred Kent will be watching.

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