The stumbling global economy, vulnerable energy supply, and loss of confidence in far-flung markets are being balanced by a surge of interest in things local: production of local food, promotion of local businesses, preservation of local character, improvement of public spaces, and perhaps most important, the rediscovery of meaningful ways to belong to a community.

Although new economic theories point to a fundamental shift in how city and regional economies function, more and more people around the world are expressing an interest in learning how to make their local assets into destinations within their cities that work as catalysts of economic growth. As a result, quality-of-life factors such as vibrant public spaces and more livable cities increasingly could become major economic drivers in attracting and retaining that capital.
Discovery Green, a 12-acre (4.9-ha) green space in downtown Houston that includes two restaurants, an interactive fountain, and a lake with a café, is credited with spurring construction of new office and residential high rises nearby.
The current downturn presents not just challenges, but also opportunities to change the way people think about development. A deep pride in local character, products, and foods suggests that the cities and towns that thrive will be differentiated by their lively neighborhoods and business districts, cultural and recreational attractions, and a stronger sense of place in their communities. Communities throughout the world can and are achieving this through an open and collaborative process among developers, city governments, local businesses, and residents.

The current slowdown in development thus offers communities an opportunity to revisit their values, local assets, and resources; to consider what they want their city or town to be known for; and to envision new types of destinations that could attract people to their downtowns and neighborhoods.

This also is having an impact on the type of development being envisioned today. The mixed-use developments that have predominated in the past few decades have focused primarily on shopping destinations—malls, strip centers, and lifestyle centers—and have failed to produce places that anchor and define communities. Cultural and educational institutions such as museums, libraries, and schools have frequently been developed in isolation, cut off from one another and from their downtowns, lacking public spaces and the surrounding uses that could make them gathering places and help sustain them economically.

These factors all point to a major opportunity for a new type of development that taps into the unmet desire for something beyond just a shopping experience: a new generation of destinations that have a strong local economic base and provide a real sense of ownership by the community.

The question of how to create these successful destinations was the focus of two recent forums titled “Creating New Models for Destinations,” organized by New York City–based Project for Public Spaces, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public places that build communities. Forward-thinking developers, managers of public spaces, nonprofits, and public sector representatives met to discuss the challenges and opportunities for development in a down economy. Discussion centered on issues such as how short-term place making can be used in development today; how civic institutions can become community anchors in conjunction with new development; and how these destinations can be made more economically sustainable in the future.

The most recent meeting was held in mid-March at Trustees’ Garden in Savannah, Georgia; its owners, Charles and Rosalie Morris, are seeking to develop the site into a new and innovative type of destination. Several themes that emerged from the meetings upend earlier thinking about development and may prove critical in exploiting the synergies between place making and profit—in a down economy as well as over the long run. Developers in the vanguard are turning away from national business opportunities to local ones; from big-box construction to a smaller scale; from fast development to slow; from going it alone to forging partnerships; and from shopping-only developments to a new array of public gathering places.

Third Places in Washington State
Ron Sher, president and CEO of Terranomics Development and a passionate advocate of new ways of thinking about development, has developed three innovative projects in Seattle as third places—informal gathering places outside the home and work-
place, as described in the 1989 book *The Great Good Place* by Ray Oldenburg. After Sher took over the derelict Crossroads Shopping Center in Bellevue, Washington, in 1988, Oldenburg’s insights inspired him to develop the project around Third Place Books as an anchor tenant, next to a central area that became a public gathering place for residents, students, and area employees. The unlikely partners at Crossroads include a library, a police station, city hall, and community meeting areas. Its gathering space is the site of live music and festivals, as well as a popular floor chess board with two-foot- (0.6-m-) tall pieces.

A similar project by Sher—Third Place Commons, in Lake Forest Park, Washington—was so beloved by members of the community that they founded a nonprofit organization, Friends of Third Place Commons, to manage the space and play host to clubs and cultural events there. The organization has become the center of a public/private nonprofit coalition that includes the city government, local businesses, an arts council, the local library, a community college, and other community groups.

**Large Urban Transformations**

Tony Goldman, founder of Goldman Properties in 1968 and a former board member and current trustee emeritus of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is known for developing emerging urban areas into dynamic pedestrian neighborhoods in places like Miami’s South Beach, Manhattan’s Soho and Financial District, and neighborhoods in Philadelphia’s Center City.

In choosing tenants for his developments, Goldman says he deliberately avoids large chain stores in order to cultivate a unique and vibrant feel. “Brands do not add to the energy; they suck the uniqueness out of an area,” he maintains. If high-quality, entrepreneurial, local anchors do not already operate in an area, he “primes the pump”—for example, by seeding a restaurant to create a café culture or introducing unique businesses to give the site an image with which others will want to associate. His strategy also gives the community and stakeholders a sense of ownership of the development from its beginning. “I lay out the silhouette of a vision for the area—not too controlling—and let other stakeholders add to the vision. Let people feel invested in the project,” he recommends.
Locally Grown Waterfront in Vancouver

Granville Island is a 43-acre (17-ha), formerly industrial waterfront in Vancouver, British Columbia, that was redeveloped in the 1970s. Because of its isolation, Granville Island had to succeed not only as a series of distinctive places, but also as a strong district. It did so by shaping development around local institutions and public spaces—such as a community center that is the site of numerous club gatherings, public meetings, and yoga classes; the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design; and a public market, with 50 permanent merchants and a seasonal farmers’ market. Granville Island is also a hub for arts and culture, with four theater spaces and a diversity of festivals that occur throughout the year. Each of Granville Island’s destinations is bolstered by the others, thanks to a network of walkways and pedestrian-dominated streets.

Now managed by executive director Lino Siracusa, Granville Island has become both a major tourist destination and a day-to-day community gathering place for the burgeoning population of high-rise dwellers in downtown Vancouver. It attracts more than 10 million visitors per year, and its 280 businesses employ 3,000 people and generate over $280 million in sales annually. “Granville Island has always been seen as a ‘people place’ that has remained authentic to its original vision,” says Siracusa. “The interesting mix of uses and the focus on our community keeps this place authentic. That’s what it’s really all about.”

Partnerships Restart Detroit’s Heart

Campus Martius, a new central square in downtown Detroit, transformed a six-point intersection into a destination where events are held year-round; an outdoor ice rink (above) is open during five winter months. Construction of office, retail, and residential space has begun on lots fronting the park (left).
Community

ships are the primary funding sources, and only two management staff members are paid. Gregory reports that park activity continues to increase, and has accelerated in the current economy.

“In creating a vision for Campus Martius Park, Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer challenged us to create one of the best public spaces in the world,” says Gregory. “At the time, this challenge seemed daunting for a city with low self-esteem and beset by a generation of economic decline. The community took on the challenge with enthusiasm, and Campus Martius Park is now truly one of the most successful public spaces in the United States.” He attributes the success to the partnership forged among the city, the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, and the business community, led by Edsel B. Ford II, chairman of the private nonprofit Detroit 300 Conservancy.

Houston Destination Sparks Development

Discovery Green in Houston transformed 12 acres (4.9 ha) of underused green space and parking lots near the convention center into a major gathering place in downtown Houston. The park, which officially opened in April 2008, and its many destinations—a one-acre (0.4-ha) lake with café, an interactive fountain, a playground, a market promenade, dog runs, a stage, a sitting lawn, and two restaurants—attracted an estimated 250,000 visitors in less than three months. (See “Houston’s Downtown Transformation” and “Houston’s New Park: Discovery Green,” October 2008, pages 82 and 87.)

“Three out of the four developable blocks across from the park are being transformed since the park was announced, and the fourth block has been assembled as a site for a second convention hotel when the economy stabilizes,” reports Guy Hagstette, president of the Discovery Green Conservancy. “Discovery Green offers both beauty and the chance to share experiences with fellow citizens, and as a result, the park is rapidly becoming the heart of a new urban neighborhood that includes a dynamic mix of residential, office, hotel, and retail offerings.

Public/Private Synergy in Santiago

The Metro Escuela Militar is one of Santiago’s busiest transit hubs, accommodating up to 4.5 million commuters per month. But its adjacent plaza and galleries were desolate and unsafe until Marcello Corbo, cofounder of the development company Urban Development, turned them into a thriving market and public space.

The project was a collaborative effort from the start, explains Corbo. The municipality of Las Condes created new plazas and taxi stops; the Ministry of Transportation modified the street design and created new bus stops; the Metro leased the galleries to Urban Development; and Urban Development found the vendors, rented out the stalls, reduced the number of access points and improved them, and assembled a private team to manage the site.

Corbo also credits SubCentro’s success to intensive community involvement. One of his first moves was to solicit the neighborhood’s opinions in an online survey to help determine the best mix of tenants for the new SubCentro. This helped give the public a stake in the project and make it feel invited and represented.

“SubCentro Las Condes was an exceptional effort to bring together the private and public sectors—but more than that, bring together those people in the institutions involved in a common good: to bring life to a place that was no one’s land in the center of Las Condes,” says Corbo.
Barcelona’s Public Markets

The importance of Barcelona’s public markets in supporting the life of the city was demonstrated last year: when a truckers’ strike left private supermarkets with bare shelves, public markets simply restocked locally.

Public markets have long been a defining characteristic of Barcelona, a city that guarantees fresh food to its residents as an essential right. In fact, few citizens are farther than a ten-minute walk from one of the 46 public markets located throughout the city. Most of these markets are housed in public halls and are run by city staff.

In recent years, the markets have been playing an increasingly important role, says Jordi Tolrà i Mabilon, director of communications for the Markets of Barcelona. Business is booming, driven partly by lower-income residents transferring more of their food spending to their local markets in response to rising prices in private supermarkets. About 15 percent of public market customers go to a market every day, Tolrà i Mabilon reports, and 45 percent go at least once a week.

Barcelona is currently renovating the public markets and incorporating small private markets into them. In the process, the city has been using the markets to catalyze positive change in their neighborhoods. “We work closely with the surrounding communities to be a key social partner,” explains Tolrà i Mabilon. “We reach out to new ethnic groups in the city and help to integrate the market into the community.”

Seeds of Revitalization in Perth

Australia may have developed along the U.S. model of suburban sprawl, shopping malls, and car-dominated streets, but it is fast becoming an epicenter of the international place-making movement. Leading the charge is a coalition called Place Leaders—made up of the leading redevelopment agencies from Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore—which has been working since its conception in 2003 to revitalize urban centers and to create and maintain successful places across Australia.

One example of the coalition’s work is an initiative being launched by Place Leaders member East Perth Redevelopment Authority (EPRA), in conjunction with local government agencies. One project is the Perth Cultural Centre, home to the city’s premier arts and cultural institutions. Centrally located adjacent to Perth’s central business, residential, and university districts, it presents a unique opportunity for the city to create a major public destination. Despite those strengths, however, the Cultural Centre had acquired a reputation for being sterile and unsafe.

EPRA saw the Cultural Centre’s potential as a linchpin in its plan to create a “vital Perth,” and is planning construction that will include a new 525-seat main theater, a 200-seat studio theater, and spaces for rehearsal and production. Simultaneously, EPRA is working with the city to revitalize 16 properties on the main arterial road bordering the Cultural Centre, upgrading historic facades, and generating leasing opportunities to create a downtown destination that will complement the district.

Although construction has not yet begun, EPRA’s team has been working with local stakeholders to lay the groundwork for the transformation by making the Cultural Centre a magnet of activity downtown. Amenities such as photo exhibitions, indie music festivals, and a regular weekend market showcasing local food producers are being offered, plus a number of additional small-scale programming changes—such as improved identity for buildings by extending interior uses to the outside, provision of a series of flexible amenities, and presentation of events that highlight...
local talent—are planned to make the area active day and night.

A New Agenda in Norway

The Norwegian government has designated 13 cities to become “cities of the future” and form the vanguard of a new approach to sustainable development. With the ultimate, long-term goal of greenhouse gas neutrality, Norway is focusing on four core priorities: land use and transportation, stationary energy, consumption patterns and waste, and adaptation to climate change.

Through those four priorities runs a strong focus on place making and shoring up local assets. The land use goals include preserving the cities’ public spaces—called almenninger, meaning commons—which have deep historical and cultural significance, and which the government sees as a key asset in attracting expertise-intensive businesses and commercial service providers. Bergen, one of the 13 cities of the future, writes in its land use plan, “The blend of residential houses, shops, offices, and businesses makes the urban spaces busy thoroughfares, places to linger, and venues for numerous activities all day long. . . . These qualities should serve as a model for urban structure in the densification areas.”

That densification is being planned to cluster around Bergen’s light-rail system, which the city is improving so that no district is more than 20 minutes from the city center. A wide-scale evaluation of the city’s pedestrian routes also has been launched to identify opportunities for improvements. In order to create destinations to support a thriving pedestrian network, the city has vowed to increase public access to recreation opportunities on the waterfront and other natural areas, and to create five new swimming spots in the city center.

“One of the overriding goals for the next few years is the reduction of the need to travel out of one’s own city or city district for recreational experiences,” the Bergen report notes. “[This] will also have a positive impact on the greenhouse gas accounts since it will reduce transport and thus also carbon emissions.”

With the growing interest in place making around the world, a new vision for cities is emerging that stems from a community’s assets—one focused on public destinations and strengthening local economies. The current economic turmoil, therefore, presents a pivotal opportunity to respond to the widespread desire for a strong public realm, forging collaborations that benefit everyone—developers, government, and, most of all, the public.

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Place Making is a book, and Place Making and Town Center Development, a ULI InfoPacket, are available at www.uli.org/bookstore, or call 800-321-5011.