

Summer 2001: Reclaiming the Commons

Great Commons of the World

by Kari McGinnis

“Commons are not just public spaces,” says Fred Kent, founder and president of Project for Public Spaces in New York City. “They're the places in a community where people gather, where the life of the community blossoms.”

Fred Kent should know. In the last 25 years, he and the PPS staff have worked in more than a thousand communities around the world “to help grow public spaces into vital community places.” Their experience has given them what Kent describes as “a unique understanding of the complex social and spatial issues” involved in creating and sustaining public places that build community. It's also led to the discovery that successful commons share certain basic qualities.

The best commons are hubs of city life where there's always something going on. Activities are the “basic building blocks” of a commons, Kent says. They're what draws people and what brings them back. Outdoor cafes provide a chance for people-watching, a favorite common-space activity. Public markets and other food-centered activities are good attractions, too, and people love to sit near fountains and touch the water. Seating, Kent has found, is critical. Movable chairs are particularly appealing, but permanent benches in the right spots can dramatically improve a visitor's experience.

The great commons are also highly visible and easy to get to — not just by car, but on foot, by bicycle, and by public transit. This quality gives a community a convenient connection to its public places and makes it easy for people to circulate within them. The most successful commons are on the way to popular destinations and are destinations themselves.

Safety and cleanliness are important, so an apparent management presence and simple, practical amenities such as plentiful waste receptacles and restrooms make a big difference. One measure of a successful commons, Kent notes, is that it attracts women and children, who are more discriminating about safety and seating.

More important are character and charm. Is the space inviting and visually pleasing? Are there sculptures? Shade trees? Fountains? Do people seem to be happy there, showing affection toward each other, touching, kissing?

Ultimately, as urban visionary William H. Whyte once noted, what attracts people is other people, especially unusual, colorful people — people with great faces, odd pets, strange clothes. If they're involved in interesting activities, so much the better. Outstanding community commons provide focal points for public gatherings and accommodate a variety of social activities, from concerts to art fairs to just plain conversations.

So what makes a vital, healthy community commons is rather simple, really: places to sit, plenty of shade, “touchable” water, good food, and well-connected streets and sidewalks. But what a

vital commons can offer a community is far from simple. A sense of identity. Belonging. Connectedness. Fun. Tradition. Stories. Great public spaces are what memories of cities are made of.

Kent's favorite commons include Luxembourg Gardens in Paris; Pioneer Courthouse Square in Portland, Oregon; Central Park in New York City; Campo Santa Margherita in Venice; and a public square in Mexico City.

Luxembourg Gardens - Paris

A leisurely stroll along the paths that wind through the Luxembourg Gardens captures the essence of what makes Paris the city of romance. The gardens surround the Luxembourg Palace, built in the early 1600s.

Your stroll will take you past swaths of brilliant flowers spread among fountains and ponds. But it's the people that keep the garden animated — from 3-year-olds chasing butterflies to 93-year-olds sitting in the shade of one of the many great trees beneath the mist of a nearby fountain. Students from the Sorbonne lounge among the many statues scattered throughout the gardens. Perhaps you'll play chess in the shade, or watch a tennis match, or snooze in the sun. You might even discover one of the park's hidden treasures — the beekeeping school or the goldfish grotto.

Then you'll wander past open-air cafes where parents and grandparents drink coffee while they watch the children play. In many ways, the gardens belong to the children. There are pony rides, a playground, and a merry-go-round, along with a marionette theater and a sailboat pond where the children use long sticks to urge the craft along.

Pioneer Courthouse Square - Portland

Pioneer Courthouse Square in Portland, Oregon, has been the city's “living room” since its grand opening in 1984. By then this city block had already been a part of life in the rose city for more than a century. It was the site of the majestic Portland Hotel from 1890 until 1950, when a two-tier parking garage shot up in its place. Then in 1972, as part of the city's Downtown Plan, the parking garage was leveled to create space for a public square.

The story of the square's development, from concept through construction, has endeared it to residents. Instead of architects and planners, the winning design team was led by a jack-of-all trades — painter, sociologist, humorist, historian, and inventor— and included a writer, a historian, and two artists. To help fund the project, community members bought bricks engraved with their names, a process that created a sense of pride and ownership. As one Portlander says proudly, “Nearly every brick in the square belongs to somebody.”

The crescent-shaped steps, designed to fit the square's natural slope, create an amphitheater that's used for lunchtime “Peanut Butter and Jam” jazz concerts and other music events. A weather machine incorporates flashing lights, mist, music, and weather symbols when it announces the forecast at noon each day. The original wrought iron gates that graced the old Portland Hotel still stand as a reminder of the city's history.

Transit facilities are carefully integrated into the edges of the square, with sheltered waiting areas and regular stops for TriMet, the tri-county bus service, and Max, the lightrail service.

But the brick plaza is more than a place to wait for the bus or the lightrail. Charles Jordan, director of Portland Parks, describes the square as “a cultural crossroads where the city's diversity is there for all to see. Green-haired street kids rub shoulders with business types in three piece suits. It may make some people uncomfortable, but parks are the most democratic pieces of land we have.” Pioneer Courthouse Square is a place where social boundaries dissolve and a community comes together.

Campo Santa Margherita - Venice

Campo Santa Margherita proves the maxim that it's people rather than amenities that attract people. The square itself is a simple, empty space, with just a tree and a few benches. Because there are no cars in Venice, the only way to get there is by walking, and everyone is in walking distance. People go out of their way to walk through Venice's Campo Santa Margherita, no matter where they're headed.

The Campo is a small community market and neighborhood gathering place — a colorful outdoor commons that combines the socializing of the public square offering the chance to buy food and flowers from local vendors. A small, stone kiosk dating from the 18th century lists the minimum sizes for the fish that were sold there when the square was a fish market.

Today, three fish mongers sell the fresh catch of the day to neighbors who've come to shop. Other vendors display bread, meat, vegetables, and flowers. A newsstand along with a few small stores and cafes line the square. One family sells eggs from a stand because even though theirs is a large family business, they prefer to sell their eggs where they can socialize with their friends. “You don't have to worry about keeping your kids in sight,” Kent explains, “because everyone looks out for everyone else in the square.”

Central Park - New York City

In the shadows of some of the world's tallest skyscrapers is Central Park, an oasis of grass, trees, and water that's as famous for its good birdwatching as its good people-watching. The romance of Central Park has inspired novels, films, poems, and songs.

Enter at any of the park's many entrances, and you'll wander along dramatic rock outcroppings, through groves of giant trees. You'll stroll along The Mall, a tree-lined promenade, and follow The Ramble through a dense forest. You'll pass Sailboat Pond, where dockside captains spend afternoons sailing their remote-control craft, and the outdoor theater, where, on sunny summer days, people watch Shakespeare in the Park. When you reach the Great Lawn, you'll see why Central Park has hosted some of the largest outdoor concerts in the country.

The park's construction began in the 1850s with an approach that today is quite unusual. Instead of starting with a complete plan based on shapes and forms and metaphors, designers simply watched people using the space and built the park to support those uses. That approach has

prevailed through the years, resulting in new ball fields, playgrounds, and even a children's zoo and a science center.

Coyoacan - Mexico City

In Mexico, Kent observes, public squares are directly related to what people do with their day. Public institutions overlap with the public space, which is designed to support daily activity but also to encourage people just to be together and socialize.

The neighborhood of Coyoacan, in Mexico City, is such a place. Its shaded cobblestone streets lined with colonial homes and museums lead to a central square that's both a plaza (the Plaza Hidalgo) and a garden (Jardin Centenario) joined together by the 16th-century church of San Juan. It is here, in the middle of historic Coyoacan, centered around the atrium of the church, that the social life of Coyoacan unfolds.

Families bring children to meet their friends. Couples stroll along the promenade talking, eating, and shopping. An old man sits on a bench near one of the fountains and gossips with his neighbors. People watch the organ-grinder and his monkey or listen to some of the area's folk, rock, or reggae bands. Coyoacan is such a central part of the community's life, Kent says, that "if you don't go there almost every day, you're missing life."
