

For The Love Of Food, Baseball And Art

Why do so many people enjoy going to Central Market, Clipper Stadium, and Prince Street on First Fridays? It's not just for the love of food, baseball and art. It's the place and the experience. And just maybe, these places have more in common than meets the eye.

Each is a fun, authentic place, full of happy and interesting people; a lively place where you can bump into old friends and watch people of all ages and backgrounds having a good time. And where you can enjoy the moment, forgetting the problems of the world, surrounded by all sorts of interesting things to see and do.

While successful destinations may look very different, the ways they attract people and provide memorable experiences are very similar. They are attractive and authentic, with a unique character. They are full of people of all ages enjoying being there. And food always manages to enhance their experience. Being there is special; it energizes the soul, brightens your day, and makes you feel good.

Fun, active destinations like our examples oftentimes have a specific purpose or theme. They provide a variety of things to see and do. Much like an event; you go, you do what you went to do, and you leave. But you don't stop to relax or stay beyond the purpose. These are fun places, but they are not true public spaces where people can go any time just to meet, gather and enjoy being there. Places where the activities are more basic: resting, people watching, having conversations, and enjoying the surroundings. So, how do you create a great public space that isn't based on the love of food, baseball or art, rather on the love of something larger and more abstract, like Downtown Lancaster?

Many people agree that Downtown Lancaster is unique place, a great destination, but there is simply nowhere people can stop and enjoy being there. If we are to create such a place, where visitors and local people want to go, linger, and enjoy the Lancaster experience, we need to better understand what makes some public spaces great and some not so great.

The Hourglass has researched what urban experts like Fred Kent say and do, as well as observed the nation's most-famous public spaces looking for important attributes of success. We have identified seven criteria that consistently help to define the best public spaces.

1. Authenticity/Character –

The best public spaces have a unique and authentic look, personality, or charm that is not found anywhere else. They are friendly and inviting. All ages and types of people feel like they are welcomed there. The space appears real, natural, and not contrived or over-designed. Often the character is historic, an extension of city's unique personality, providing a comforting, emotional, memory-laden backdrop.

2. Centricity –

A well-used, successful space is convenient and connected. It is not out-of-the-way. Rather, it is often at the center of what is happening. It has easy ‘walkable’ access from different approaches, whether going to or coming from adjacent activities. Its location reflects the needs of people walking, not driving. It is surrounded by a variety of interesting things to see and do. From this place you can set out to experience much of what the city has to offer.

3. Context –

The space looks like it belongs where it is. It has visual context and relatedness to what is around it. It captures the look, feel, personality and history of the area. It blends into and enhances the surrounding environment. By its location, safety, cleanliness and attractiveness, it invites people to meet and gather, or just to stop and enjoy the experience. It is situated where the people are, not where there is a vacant space to fill.

4. Scale –

The most popular public spaces have human scale, providing a sense of identity, control and comfort. The space is as large as it needs to be. It does not intimidate by its grandness or confine by its smallness. It is of a size and scale people can relate to. And it provides friendly, convenient places for people to sit, talk and enjoy the surroundings. A great space is a comfortable fit with the people who use it and the area where it is located.

5. People –

Great public spaces bring people together. They are full of happy, interesting people enjoying the moment. It’s simple; people attract people. They go to relax, meet friends, make friends, watch people, or to be part of what is happening. Some go to interact, some to get lost in the crowd, some to escape daily pressures, while many go just to enjoy a beautiful, happy environment. Being there is fun and uplifting.

6. Activities –

The primary activities are basic: relaxing, watching people, conversation, and enjoying the beauty of the place and the surrounding area. Being there never gets boring; the space is constantly changing with new people, events, and the changing seasons. Great places offer great views of the area and the world passing by. Food, drink, and activities may be within the space or located nearby. Special events and activities add excitement.

7. Beauty –

The space stands out and attracts people. It compliments a beautiful and often historic downtown. The vistas, inside and out, are attractive and interesting. And since all people appreciate beauty, everywhere you look you find something to admire. There are comforting touches of nature such as trees, flowers and grass. The architecture, lighting, benches, trashcans, and public art are aesthetically appropriate to the space and contribute to a beautiful, quality feeling.

The Challenge for Downtown Lancaster –

As Downtown Lancaster strives to develop one or more great public spaces, the Hourglass hopes that these criteria can serve as conceptual building blocks. Equally, important as the criteria, is the process. The conventional project-driven approach -- where one city department with narrow goals defines the problem, hip-shoots a solution and hires a design professional to make the problem go away -- just doesn't result in great public spaces. What works far better is the community-driven approach that recognizes the power of public-private partnerships. The process is fluid and flexible. The objective isn't to make a design statement, it's to create a place for people to stop, gather, and enjoy being there. Most importantly, the space is designed with the input and involvement of the people who use it, meeting their needs and honoring the unique character of the surroundings. And oftentimes, money isn't a problem because passionate private involvement includes private financial support. It's a win-win for the city and the people.

Where in Downtown Lancaster? While not a large space, the natural location for a great public space is Penn Square. It meets most of the criteria for success that we identified. Currently, the space is a lost opportunity, especially the area next to Central Market. It needs to be improved making it attractive and welcoming. The space is not used effectively. There are only a few outdated planters where people are forced to sit, and a large open area that delivery/service vehicles abuse. The site is not attractive or inviting to people looking for a place to stop and enjoy the Downtown. And yet, this space is centrally located, a hub of activity, offering beautiful views of the city, and is near interesting things to see and do. It's an area that captures the character of the city. Removing the planters and adding a few benches, trees and flowers would be a good start. Properly designed, the space next to Central Market and the space by Fulton Bank could become an attractive centerpiece for Downtown Lancaster. It would be a great public space to be admired and enjoyed by both visitors and residents. And because it is a small space, it is easier to make a strong visual statement, it is an affordable project, and it doesn't interrupt the streetscape or take property that could be developed.