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MAKING PLACES *November 2004*

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The Power of Ten

Why Great Places are more than the sum of their parts.

by Fred Kent

Early in 2004 we were asked by Mimi Gates, the director of the Seattle Art Museum, to review plans for a new wing of the building. PPS Vice-President Kathy Madden and I were touring the Museum grounds with a group of local citizens, brainstorming how best to generate public activity around the building. Ideas were flying, and gradually we developed a vision for a series of focal points on the grounds and inside its lobby.

As we got deeper into our discussion, someone asked, "How many separate focal points do you need to make it successful?"



The entrance to the Seattle Art Museum represents an opportunity to create a focal point for public activity...

At PPS, we usually don't talk in terms of numbers, so I had to give the matter some thought. I wanted to offer a challenging answer, but not something that would feel completely out of reach. "Ten," I said. "But we can't just plop down ten pieces of sculpture and say that's enough. We also need ten things to do at each focal point."

That got everyone thinking about what makes great places great. It's really a

Special Features:

Purple Places Majesty

A way forward for America beyond red and blue.

What If We Built Our Cities Around Places?

PPS announces its new Great Cities Initiative, which applies the principles of placemaking to entire cities.

The 20 Best Neighborhoods in North America

Here are our picks. Now it's your turn to select the best spots to live, work, and hang out. Plus: A few of our favorite neighborhoods abroad.

Granville Island: One of the World's Great Places

In the heart of Vancouver, this lively mix of arts, parks, and markets leads off our new hall of fame for great neighborhoods and districts.

The Power of Ten

Why Great Places are more than the sum of their parts.

Cities of Joy

Enrique Peñalosa, former mayor of Bogotá, believes that one day cities of the developing world will offer us lessons about providing everyone with equal access to happiness.

A Tale of Two Cities

Las Vegas is America's fastest growing city. Cleveland is called the mistake by the lake. What's wrong with this picture? Jay Walljasper investigates in Town Square.

Regular Columns:

News from PPS

Announcing a new book by PPS Board member and former Congressman Richard Swett. And -- from Seattle to New Jersey to Eastern Europe -- read about how PPS is turning around places across the globe.

Park Talk

Read what people had to say about our choices for the world's best and worst parks. Plus: The National Park Service and the Downtown DC BID team up to improve public spaces in the capital.

The Place Poll

matter of offering a variety of things to do in one spot -- whose quality as a place then becomes more than the sum of its parts. A park is good. A park with a fountain, playground, and popcorn vendor is better. A library across the street is even better, more so if they feature storytelling hours for kids and exhibits on local history. If there's a sidewalk café nearby, a bus stop, a bike trail, and an ice cream parlor, then you have what most people would consider a great place.

What if a downtown had ten places that good? The area would then have a critical mass -- a series of destinations where tourists and residents alike could become immersed in the city for days at a time.



...and if we created ten places in downtown Seattle as good as the revitalized Art Museum, then it would be a great district.

Taking the next step, what if a city could boast ten such neighborhoods? Then every resident would have access to outstanding public spaces within walking distance of their own homes. That's the sort of goal we should set for all cities if we are serious about enhancing and revitalizing urban life.

I think we can go further still. How? Apply the "Power of Ten" on a regional scale by linking towns and cities together, with major public spaces and mixed-use neighborhoods serving as connections. That could be the basis for a new paradigm of regional development that sweeps away the destructive pattern of more freeways, big box stores, and cookie-cutter subdivisions.

This idea gives people something tangible to strive for -- it helps them visualize what it takes to make their town or city great.

PPS calls this concept the Power of Ten (indebted to the classic short film, "Powers of 10," by Charles and Ray Eames), but there's no reason to get fixated on a particular number. Whether you're talking about places in a given neighborhood, or great neighborhoods within a city, "Ten" refers generally to the ultimate goals of variety and choice. When we talk about the "Power of Ten," we're stressing the fact that we should always think of how Placemaking can be accomplished at different scales.

To build our cities around places, as explored in this issue's feature story, it's not enough to have a single use dominate a particular place -- you need a diverse array of activities for people. It's not enough to have just one great

Tell us what you think of the latest batch of nominations for Great Public Spaces.

Public Voices

A reader dissects our city commentaries and poses the question: Is the quality of a place simply a matter of taste?

Places in the News

See which public spaces made headlines in October and November.

place in a neighborhood -- you need a number of them to create a truly lively town. It's not enough to have one superior neighborhood in a city -- you need to provide people all over town with close-to-home opportunities to take pleasure in public life. And it's not enough to have one livable city or town in a region -- you need a collection of interesting communities.



Greenwich Village compensates for a lack of outstanding individual public spaces with its abundance of street-level attractions.

One of the chief values of using the Power of Ten as a framework for thinking about place is its flexibility. Take the neighborhood where our office is located, Greenwich Village. There may not be ten great public spaces within its boundaries, or even five. But it makes up for this deficiency with a vibrant streetlife and hundreds of small cafes, bars, restaurants, theaters, and small shops enlivening the neighborhood. Likewise, we're sure there are towns too small to possess ten or even three distinct neighborhoods, but which succeed as places nonetheless thanks to a plethora of healthy and lively public spaces. You can bend the principles behind the Power of Ten, as long as you preserve the spirit.

This is an idea that gets people excited. Everywhere we bring up the Power of Ten, local citizens become more motivated and energized to turn their places around. We think it's because this idea gives people something tangible to strive for -- it helps them visualize what it takes to make their town or city great. As we promote a broader mission for Placemaking with our [Great Cities Initiative](#), the Power of Ten is our way of reminding our clients, our readers, and ourselves that by starting efforts at the smallest scale, you can steadily accomplish big changes.

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