

# An Opportunity to Grow a Great City Through Placemaking:

## Phase I Summary



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In late 2004, the City of Mississauga asked Project for Public Spaces (PPS) to propose a program for revitalizing the public spaces in and around downtown Mississauga, with particular focus on the new parks and open spaces in the City Centre. The program was envisioned as an integrated campaign that involved high-level training, targeted place-making workshops, and an interactive website documenting and facilitating improvement plans.

From June 13 to 16<sup>th</sup>, PPS initiated the first phase with a series of meetings and workshops mainly focused on introducing City staff and leadership to the concept and practice of placemaking and demonstrating the workshop technique that will be used in later phases on actual public space improvement projects. Over 200 people participated at some point in the meetings.

We compliment the local team for putting together our June visit, which was one of the best-organized and most strategically thought out visits we have ever made anywhere. This success is due also to the openness, creativity and sincere dedication of all of the City staff participants with whom we were lucky enough to work.

Project for Public Spaces is a non-profit corporation that has worked in over 1200 communities in North America and abroad to improve public spaces so they are more active, usable, and attractive destinations. PPS has become widely known for its innovative approach to community revitalization that focuses on the behavior, expressed needs and collaborative visioning of community members. In the course of its work over 30 years, the same theme has come up repeatedly, especially in the last few years: *More and more people are feeling a loss of community and a lack of control over, and connection to, the changes taking place in their public environments.*

Achieving this balance of users is fundamental to creating a competitive economy: recent research by Richard Florida at Carnegie Mellon University has been widely published for its potential implications on future planning decisions. It notes that the best predictor for a City's competitiveness is its ability to attract a "creative class" (professional-technical people, entrepreneurs, entertainers, scientists, musicians, artists, cultural producers, etc.), and that to attract this class a city needs to nurture a diverse and stimulating culture made up of, among other things; the arts, cafes, nightlife, pedestrian and bike-friendly districts and other amenities that improve the quality of life. The public spaces of Mississauga, including its streets, parks, public buildings and businesses are the source of Mississauga's greatest potential, as well as one of its biggest challenges.

### **Mississauga needs places**

Mississauga is a large city that is known for its excellent city services, infrastructure and financial management. But while most indicators point to it as a great place to live, its downtown lacks an identity and offers little to its residents in term of attractive places and destinations. The City's many assets – whether a community centre, arts facility, or library – mainly stand as separate facilities, with poor connections between and accessible almost exclusively by car.

The vast investment these assets and development represent does not add up to a great downtown or an appealing urban environment. The challenge and opportunity now is to grow, activate and pull together these institutions. Developing the capacity to actively manage these spaces will be key to their success, as well as the ability of different sectors of city government to collaborate in retrofitting the buildings roads and open spaces.

With a population of 700,000, and millions within close driving distance, there is an enormous unmet potential for a livelier downtown with more places for people to go. The purpose of this Placemaking project is to look at the “ground floor” of the city - streets, sidewalks, parks, buildings and other public spaces – and discover how it can invite greater interaction between people and foster a healthier, more social and more economically viable environment. Downtown’s public spaces should support and bring out the best of Mississauga’s institutions and private developments, and should make all of these a part of something larger. It is this something larger that is the vision that each part of the City can help build and conform to – indeed it is this something larger that is what makes cities great.

## **Introducing Placemaking to Mississauga**

The June schedule of events consisted of three and a half days of on-site tours, meetings, training courses, workshops and presentations.

Monday: a guided tour of the City, including Streetsville, Hershey/Iceland Sports Centre, Erindale Park, and all the downtown spaces that became the subject of workshops later in the week.

Tuesday: a full day Training Course and Placemaking Workshop focusing on the City Centre areas. Even though only a training exercise, the event yielded powerful short term ideas and long term visions. It also seemed to facilitate several valuable cross-departmental conversations, which do not seem to happen as often as they should.



Wednesday morning: Two-hour presentation to a larger cross section of City staff. The questions after the presentation and discussions afterwards reflected an excitement about how Placemaking can be applied to many departments and many sectors of the City. Staff from specific community centers and branch libraries proposed pilot projects after the presentation.

Wednesday Afternoon: Interdepartmental City Centre workshop focused on how to advance Placemaking goals for the City Centre Parks. Uncovered key principles, location opportunities, obstacles and strategies for overcoming obstacles (full results available).

Thursday Morning: Presentation of week's experience, findings and recommendations to the Leadership team.

### **The Power of Ten: Creating a vision for City Centre and beyond**

City Centre needs to have a larger vision for it to ever evolve into a successful downtown district. Destinations need to be developed and enhanced and connected into a district that invites walking and exploration. During our presentations, we introduced a concept we call the Power of Ten. Successful cities and towns are built around dynamic places or destinations that attract people downtown. Each of these destinations is successful because it has a diverse array of activities for people – ten things to do. It's not enough to have just one great destination in a downtown -- you need a number of them (ten, for example) to create a truly lively town. And it's not enough to have one great neighborhood in a city -- you need to provide people all over town with close-to-home opportunities to take pleasure in public life.

The City of Mississauga, to become a great city, needs to have at least ten great major destinations. Some of these destinations already exist, while others need to be made stronger, building on existing assets. During our observations and workshops we identified many of the key places, including the City Hall plaza, central library and plaza, Burnhamthorpe Road, Square One, Living Arts Centre, the Credit River, and the three new parks west of the LAC and adjacent to Zonta Meadows.



According to the Power of 10 principle, each of these places needs 10 things to do in them to become a great destination. The challenge in growing these places is, in many ways, to come up with the right list of activities that will attract people. Additional design and infrastructure should be focused on supporting these desired uses. And a management system should be in

place before, during and especially after this process, to ensure that that these places do satisfy the community's expectations on an on-going basis.

While the City Centre places listed above emerged as the highest priority places, many others were also identified both in the City Centre and the neighborhoods, and there was obviously tremendous interest in applying placemaking techniques to many areas of the City.

What follows is our evaluation of ten of the most important public spaces and their obstacles and opportunities:

### **A Civic Square showcasing and drawing on the best of Mississauga**

The plazas in front of the library and City Hall probably need to be combined and retrofitted: together this space can become the active square that brings a sense of identity to City Centre. Moving the market



Campus Martius, a recently completed civic square in Detroit, for which PPS developed the vision.

here would be one important step; adding ground floor uses is also crucial. The new moveable chairs and tables were a great first step toward creating a more flexible, programmable space. The City should begin to experiment here with different kinds of monthly and weekly events (e.g. markets, concerts) and daily activities.

### **New City Centre parks for a new kind of downtown community**

An opportunity to define and grow a community around the new development sites, this site needs to be more than a neighborhood park and attract many kinds of downtown and entertainment uses. The park needs to be active with a connection drawing the three parks together. Edge uses in the new parks will be important as well as destinations that draw people into them.



Existing downtown residents should be engaged, as they will likely have similar needs and interests as the future residents in adjacent buildings to the park. It is actually of benefit that

there are not yet residents of the new towers, as they might have wanted to limit the use of these parks by the public, impeding the expressed goals of City Centre.

These parks will be used by many people already living in the City Centre, as well as by people from all over Mississauga. They can not just be based on a neighborhood park model but on an urban parks model with more active uses. This is a challenging opportunity to define a creative downtown neighborhood and a creative city with a creative park.



Vision for a new downtown park in Houston that PPS developed through a city-wide public visioning process.

### **Living Arts Centre as not just a facility but a destination**

This facility has a great potential to bring more life into downtown's public spaces, although for now the spaces around it are mostly unused and the arts programming is strictly indoors. There are pleasant grassy areas that offer no way to use them, and a water feature that is almost impossible to find. The ground floor restaurant is hidden behind curtains and has no outdoor seating. We think the LAC is a great potential source for innovative programs that can bring activity to Mississauga's public spaces. The building can also be retrofitted to be an effective neighbor to the new park blocks.



## A Vision for Retail



With almost 100% of the downtown's retail in its walls, Square One is a real building block of the City Centre. The real question for the City is, can Square One look ahead to its long term viability as a City Centre destination, by integrating its retail into a pedestrian-friendly downtown environment? Downtown and the mall are mutually dependent components of the City and regional economy; both are anchors for the City's continued growth. However, downtown quality of life will be far

from reaching its potential, until the City and Square One agree on a mutually beneficial retail strategy that brings retail out to the City sidewalks. This is to the benefit of both partners: Square One's support of a bigger vision for downtown means that the City can support a larger vision for Square One.

## City Centre roads as places

The streets and roads of the City Centre are an obstacle and an opportunity for building a great downtown. All of the roads entering the City Centre should be designed to transition to an urban, downtown street environment, perhaps getting narrower as they get further in side the City Centre. Closing or redesigning the City Centre Drive between City Hall and the Central Library plaza and redesigning the Princess Royal Drive between the City Hall and the LAC should be explored.



## Burnhamthorpe as a grand boulevard

Burnhamthorpe is a major identifying feature of the City; however it is built for a peak commuter capacity to funnel traffic through town, rather than as a featured street of City Centre. As such, it's current form is in conflict with the City's goal of enlivening City Centre with a more pedestrian-friendly environment.



Where Burnhamthorpe crosses the Credit River, it is brought down to two lanes each way, which is a standard we suggest could be maintained through the City Centre. Generally, we believe downtown roads in any city should never be more than two lanes in each direction.



Paseo de Gracías in Barcelona is a defining feature of the city and a major public amenity.

If Burnhamthorpe needs to maintain most of its capacity, it can become a boulevard with through lanes in the middle and side access roads for local destination traffic. This would help its efficiency while also improving it as a place to bike, walk, and navigate as a local driver. Such a boulevard could become a major civic amenity that could attract businesses and residential development to the City.

### Developers as partners



The developers of the substantial residential development in and around the City Centre are important partners that can help build and be encouraged to conform to a bold vision for the City Centre. Looking to some of the best new developments in the world, such as those found in Vancouver, Mississauga could be getting even better buildings.

Many of downtown's buildings are designed as if the City is not a real downtown environment. Although the density is impressive, the buildings are still suburban-style, car-oriented designs and there are few things for residents to do in nearby outdoor spaces. Developers can and should be at the table to drive a bolder vision to which their buildings can belong. They need to also commit to the ongoing programming and management and business recruitment in the City Centre.

## Transit as a catalyst for Placemaking

Placemaking around transit stops represents an additional opportunity. The bus transfer station serves Square One, but is very isolated from the downtown core. Even bus shelters can be located to be more accessible and triangulate uses and activities, becoming catalysts for building communities and perhaps helping build ridership.



## Credit River Greenway Park



This park /greenway represents a terrific opportunity that few other cities have. It is an especially important opportunity for Mississauga to take advantage of, since it could be a major identifying feature for the City – on a par with Toronto and its waterfront, Stanley Park in Vancouver, the South Platte River Greenway in Denver, CO, or the Burke-Gilman Trail in Seattle, WA. The densification of the City Centre will bring residents with new needs for a range of

different kinds of parks and the Credit River is only a few minutes away. The new residents will need places to walk, to have picnics, or take their children and dogs. This park/greenway, with its potential to connect from the northern City border to the lake, is an unparalleled City asset waiting to be uncovered.

## Community institutions as Placemaking opportunities

Indoor spaces also present great Placemaking opportunities, such as libraries and community centres. These are wonderful facilities, with many uses combined to an extent that is rare. These uses can be overlapped even further, brought out side and better connected with the communities they are meant to serve. Doing a Placemaking exercise at one or two of these locations, as pilot projects, could offer the opportunity to evaluate and envision a broader role and function for these facilities. As an added benefit, additional staff would be engaged to grow their facilities as places.



## **Placemaking management team**

As part of ongoing Placemaking efforts for the City Centre there needs to be a cross-disciplinary management team in city government and ultimately a public-private community partnership organization. Forming these teams in and of itself will be an experiment in reinventing government to be more efficient and supportive of building communities and Placemaking. Members might include individuals from several departments, Square One, developers and building managers with all members contributing funds, skills and time.

To encourage this, PPS can potentially offer more targeted training to City staff and local planning and design professionals as well as additional place game workshops in neighborhoods and in others, perhaps in Phase III.

## **Conclusion**

The City of Mississauga has yet to realize its fullest potential in creating a truly vibrant and vital downtown with great places. However, Mississauga's greatest strength is the people administering the business of the City. In fact, in all the communities in which PPS has worked, we have never been to a city with as much unrealized potential for new great places yet with a leadership so ready to move into action.

A new way of doing things is needed: departmentalized attitudes need to be broken down to create a City-wide focus involving all departments; the public needs to be engaged from the beginning, before any preconceived ideas are developed; parks and open spaces need to be managed for the uses and programs that can occur there, not just for maintenance and sanitation.

Placemaking is ideal for Mississauga, where so much capital/physical investment has been made, especially over the last 30 years. It is now necessary to grow this infrastructure through placemaking by focusing on managing the places, and bringing the physical investment (whether parks, plazas, trails, roads, public institutions, or other open spaces) up to its highest possible use. Many of the Placemaking improvements will focus on low cost improvements, management efforts and even potentially self-financing initiatives.

We are very excited for the potential of a continued relationship with the City of Mississauga and its staff. This fast-growing city seems poised to take on a Placemaking agenda. We look forward to continuing to facilitate, inform and inspire great places in Mississauga. By focusing first on the City Centre, Mississauga can continue to build its identity as a great city and develop its talented staff into a team of great Placemakers.