

PUBLIC SPACES

Make a Difference in NYC

BY SARAH RIPPLINGER

NAVIGATING THROUGH THE busy streets of any major city is a harrowing undertaking. Taxis race through intersections; there is a general melee of honking horns, screeching brakes; and pell-mell sounds from stores and people. It's little wonder that, for many urbanites, the focus is getting to their final destinations as fast as possible, not lingering on city streets to take in the view.

That's where Fred Kent and Project for Public Spaces (PPS) step in. For Kent, president of PPS, city streets are an untamed wilderness rife with opportunities for a new and pioneering form of public engagement.

"In the US, there seems to still be a lid on openness and creativity [in the public realm]," said Kent, who headquarters in NYC. "In this country we are defined more by disciplines than by community actions."

Kent and PPS are working to redefine the idea of a city as an organic whole – and not only a commercial Mecca – by uncovering the civic centers lying dormant below looming buildings and crowded roads. A tall order, Kent said, for projects that don't follow the typical rules of the road in city planning.

"The biggest obstacles are designers, traffic engineers and

managers that insist that you have to do it by-the-book. The book is always defined by a narrowly focused discipline that wants to control outcomes and limit public engagement and use."

PPS does the exact opposite: it pushes the limits and dispels common perceptions of how city infrastructure: streets, sidewalks, squares and buildings, should look and function.

Farmers markets form part of PPS's vision for the establishment of more inclusive public spaces. They are one example of groups and individuals reclaiming the streetscape and transforming it into an open-air commercial and community space.

"Markets, starting with farmers markets, have increased exponentially in the last 10 years," said Kent. "But that kind of special market is just the tip of the iceberg. There are all kinds of markets happening everywhere... The other area we see a resurgence in is town/ community squares. Watching a community regenerate itself around the community gathering space is off-the-charts exciting. That is also happening world-wide."

PPS is a key player in the global movement that's transforming urban landscapes from lonely places of concrete and congestion, to places where people can gather, commute, exchange goods and ideas and celebrate. A



BRYANT PARK, LATE APRIL 2009
PHOTO BY ED YOURDON

not-for-profit organization established in 1975 and based in NYC, PPS works to influence policy and policymakers to support community-friendly planning and development. So far, the organization has worked on projects in over 2,500 communities in 40 countries.

Thirty-five years ago, NYC was plagued by economic problems and high crime rates. In Bryant Park, the problem was obvious. Drugs



and gangs had taken over the area located near Times Square – between 42nd and 40th streets – to such an extent that, by 1979, local authorities had pretty well given up any hope of reclaiming the park as a public amenity.

In a 1981 report, William H. Whyte, a mentor of PPS, raised the alarm about the severity of the drug-trafficking problem in the park and the need for changes to the park’s design. As a result, PPS did a master plan and several improvements to the park infrastructure were made, including clearing away hedges to make the park a more open and well-lit space, and introducing commercial uses, such a food and beverage stands.

“Back then, Bryant Park was really in a bad situation,” said Kent. “Today, it’s probably the most successful public square in the world.”

The Rockefeller Brothers Foundation saw potential economic and social opportunities in the park, which sits between Avenue of the Americas and the New York public library main branch, and created the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation to manage its public and commercial aspects. Since the re-development, a slew of public events have taken place in Bryant Park, including free concerts and a summer movie festival. Roving security guards have also been instated to deter criminal activity.

There have been downsides to introducing commercial activity to the park. PPS has argued that hosting large-scale and ongoing events, such as the Barnum and Bailey Circus and bi-annual Seventh on Sixth fashion shows, clash with the design and objectives of the small public space.

Still, the introduction of commercialism to the grassy park has

breathed new life into a spot once controlled by drug dealers. Coffee stands, bocce ball courts, library reading rooms and other amenities all give “people reasons to be there [in a public space] beyond the drug dealing,” said Kent, “and that’s a real paradigm shift.”

Forging ahead in NYC, PPS partnered with Transportation Alternatives and the Open Planning Project in 2005 to co-found the New York City Streets Renaissance campaign. The campaign created a new vision for more pedestrian- and cycling-friendly areas within the city. Many of the community visions have since been built, including that for the Meatpacking District redevelopment – the first plaza to be completed within the NYC Department of Transportation’s public plaza program. Similar to many other PPS initiatives, this project is all about creating a place for people, aka “Placemaking.”



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FRED KENT, PRESIDENT OF PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES. PHOTO COURTESY OF PPS

Placemaking involves creating more livable roads and nodes within cities: places where people can cycle, walk, soak up some sun and socialize in a safe and inviting environment. It’s a concept that’s driving the future of PPS, according to Kent.

“Placemaking means taking the idea of creating places to a community/ city/ region-wide agenda. We have the simple idea of working through communities to create something we call “The Power of 10.” If a city or community has 10 good to great places, then they are very unusual; but, ask the community what are their 10 best places, 10 worst places and 10 places with the biggest opportunity, and you will get a groundswell of input, and the potential for real action.”

In the Big Apple, the Placemaking experiment is catching on. The Streets Renaissance Campaign spurred two other public space advocacy initiatives: Streetsblog and Streetfilms, which have taken on the task of documenting the successes and failures of NYC’s transportation system. The Livable Streets Network takes this one step further by bringing the core concepts of the Streets Renaissance Campaign to other cities using the Internet as a portal for information exchange.

But NYC is just the tip of the iceberg.

“I think there has been a massive shift in attitude in the past few years,” said Kent. “People in communities are deeply wise about their own social community needs, but they are seldom asked.”

Using The Power of 10, Kent said that he and PPS will continue to work with communities around the world to develop inclusive public spaces, uncovering the oases hidden below urban badlands. ☘