

LEADING  
BY EXAMPLE

THE PLACE  
DOCTOR

# Fred Kent

Fred Kent, founder of the Project for Public Spaces, is on a mission to put soul back into our communities, one park bench at a time ►

BY BARBARA PALMER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DENNIS CHALKIN



# Y

ou could say that it all started with the benches. \* In 1975, the newly founded Project for Public Spaces (PPS) — a kind of laboratory for the study of the dynamics of people in urban places — was operating, rent-free, in offices in New York City’s Rockefeller Center. The office space was given in exchange for the fledgling organization’s advice on how to improve Rockefeller Center’s own public space. Rockefeller Center managers came to PPS with a particularly vexing problem: People were sitting on the ledges of the planters near Fifth Avenue, damaging the landscaping. Could PPS advise them on what kind of spikes they could install to keep the public from sitting on the yews?

PPS President Fred Kent and his colleagues responded with a simple — but then-radical — proposal: Instead of spikes, what about adding benches, so people would have a place to sit down? “The mid-1970s was a very difficult time in New York,” Kent recalled during a recent interview. With the city’s enormous problems of homelessness and drug dealing on the streets, he said, “there was no seating anywhere because of fears about who would use it.”

Kent had founded the nonprofit PPS in order to build on the work of his mentor, William H. Whyte, who conducted pioneering research analyzing pedestrian behavior in New York City’s public spaces in the 1960s and 1970s. Among Whyte’s common-sense observations: “People sit where there are places to sit” and “People attract people.” If Rockefeller Center’s managers were to encourage people to sit down and linger in the center’s public spaces, Kent suggested, those same people might begin to shop at the center’s stores.

The benches were added, and, over time, the center turned a corner. Encouraged, managers removed the yew trees altogether in favor of rotating plant displays. Today, Rockefeller Center “has probably become the best square in the world — almost by coincidence and a little bit of luck,” Kent said. “They were looking for a solution that wasn’t the negative one, but the positive one.”

## Creating Community

The Rockefeller Center project was a paradigm-shifting illustration of the power of “placemaking,” a term that PPS uses to describe the act of deliberately creating public community spaces that are comfortable, accessible, and filled with enjoyable activities that encourage interaction. “A great street anywhere in the world has amazing amounts of activity,” Kent said. The placemaking philosophy can be encapsulated in the question he has put to hundreds of audiences: “What if we

designed our cities around community wellbeing and making people happy?”

Since 1975, PPS has asked versions of that question in 2,500 communities in 48 states and 30 countries, influencing the local development of some of the most successful urban spaces in the world. In the early 1980s, PPS helped create a revitalization plan for Midtown Manhattan’s Bryant Park, which at the time was home to nine different drug-dealing operations and avoided by most New Yorkers, even during the day. After interviewing park visitors, nearby office workers — and the drug dealers — PPS recommended making the park more welcoming by cutting down its thick hedges and adding places where visitors could buy food. An outdoor-dining restaurant and kiosks selling coffee and sandwiches were positioned in prime drug-dealing locations, where they would crowd out illegal activity.

Today — thanks to the addition of a carousel, a winter skating rink, holiday events, amenities including free yoga classes, an outdoor reading room stocked with books and magazines, wireless Internet, a music and film series, well-maintained public restrooms outfitted with sprays of fresh flowers, and plentiful seating (2,000 movable chairs) — the eight-acre park averages 20,000 visitors a day. Bryant Park’s transformation has benefited not only visitors but also the commercial buildings adjacent to the park, where rents have risen far more than those of other nearby buildings. “The area is night-and-day different,” Kent said, “because of Bryant Park.” He added: “All of this is common sense. It’s not rocket science by any stretch. Whole cities can be changed by thinking about community places.”

## From Small Town to Big City

Kent grew up in the small town of Andover, Mass., and describes his childhood there as being filled with “amazing freedom.” He roamed all over by bicycle, making “the most amazing things out of so many different places: forests, swamps,” he recalled. “I just have this memory of being almost entirely free” to go anywhere.

He majored in geography at Columbia University as an undergraduate, and later, as a graduate student at Columbia, studied with the anthropologist Margaret Mead and with economist Barbara Ward, an early advocate of sustainable development. He was an activist in the 1960s, founding a “street academy” school for Latino and African American high-school dropouts and organizing New York City’s first Earth Day in 1970. Through Earth Day, he met Whyte and became a researcher for Whyte’s Street Life Project, which put a cadre of researchers onto New York City’s streets to observe pedestrian flow and record patterns of interaction. Whyte gave Kent a camera and told him to study a two-and-a-half-block-long stretch along Lexington Avenue. ▶



**AT HOME IN THE CITY:** Fred Kent, founder of the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) and an advocate for community-led development of public places for more than three decades, at Union Square in New York City. Communities should be designed around people, not cars, he maintains. “We’re beginning to realize that the automobile is not our friend.”







**PARK YOURSELF:** Great places pay attention to the amenities — and get the chairs right, said Kent, whose research into how people use public places has generated hundreds of photographs of people sitting — at ease and not so easily — in public spaces around the world. “People like to be in places where they can socialize and be a part of a community.”

Kent spent a summer photographing the streets, becoming an expert at what he calls the “ergonomics of place.” He came to understand what makes street corners and plazas work, and learned to closely watch “how people come into a space, what they look at, where they stop,” he said. “You can get into so many details.” Like Whyte, PPS uses time-lapse photography and other methods to quantify pedestrian and automobile traffic patterns, but much of what can be learned about a place is

through simple observation. “If you train yourself to observe,” Kent said, “you can learn so much.”

Kent still carries a camera, and, in 33 years, he and PPS have amassed 700,000 photographs from all over the world that graphically illustrate to audiences how people are — and are not — made to feel comfortable and connected in public places. Kent and other PPS staff speak at conferences and community meetings, and work directly with developers, municipalities, libraries, transit agencies, universities, hotel associations, community development corporations, and the AARP, among other clients. The hundreds of projects PPS has worked on in its 33-year history have ranged from small-town farmer’s markets to the recent multimillion-dollar Discovery Green downtown park in Houston, which opened last April. They’ve worked with traffic engineers in New Jersey and with community leaders in Eastern Europe who were trying to rebuild public spaces after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

A recent workshop at PPS’ New York City office called “How to Turn a Place Around” drew more than two dozen participants from Japan, Canada, Bermuda, Jamaica, and several regions of the United States. One of PPS’ mantras is “It takes many disciplines to create a place,” and the occupational diversity of the workshop’s attendees delighted Kent: urban planners, librarians, a branding specialist, tourism development managers, a childbirth instructor, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, a landscape architect, and an undergraduate working on a Brooklyn community art project.

With his wire-rimmed glasses, khakis, and an open-collared shirt, 65-year-old Kent looks more like a humanities professor than the president of an organization with a global portfolio. When it comes to discussing PPS’ accomplishments, he is quick to deflect credit to others, including PPS Senior Vice President Kathy Madden, Kent’s partner and an environmental designer who has been part of the organization from its inception. “We

## A Site for Sites

### The Project for Public Spaces Web site

([www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)) is jam-packed with information, including stories of cities and towns that have turned their public spaces around and articles outlining the PPS approach to improving downtowns, creating successful public squares and markets, curbing urban sprawl, improving public transit, and more. The site profiles winners in its lists of the world’s great places — and points a finger at some surprising losers in a “Hall of Shame.”





**"THE PLACE GAME": PPS workshop participants learn to evaluate public places by observing, among other things, the number of people in groups and the presence of children and seniors. Above left, Robin Lester, PPS, with Marilyn Gignilliat and Kim Carlson. Above right, Deborah Patterson and Kristina Berban. Right, clockwise from left, Mike Lanza, Gignilliat, Jodi McLaughlin, Carlson, Berban, and Lester.**



## What Makes A Place Great?

**Fred Kent has spent more than 30 years studying** the question of what makes places great, and it turns out that iconic architecture isn't the most important issue. "A lot of people will say that you need some big deal to attract attention," Kent said. "We say you need a great destination or a great place for people to go."

Based on their observation and analysis of more than a thousand public spaces around the world, PPS staff have identified four key qualities common to the best of them. As listed in the organization's *How to Turn a Place Around: A Handbook for Creating Successful Places*, they are:

**Accessibility:** Successful public places are easy to get to, and people can easily move around within them. Ideally, they are near public transportation.

**Comfort and image:** Amenities that make a place comfortable — such as food kiosks and benches at the right height for sitting — are critical. Other important attributes are cleanliness, charm, and a feeling of safety.

**Uses and activities:** Activity is fundamental to great places. Kent dislikes the trend toward converting urban parks into open spaces that provide few things for people to do. The park of the future, Kent said, will be more like Europe's 19th-century pleasure gardens, such as Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen. One good contemporary example is downtown Houston's newly opened Discovery Green, where visitors can play bocce or horseshoes, picnic, take Pilates classes, play in a fountain, attend free concerts, shop at a farmer's market, kayak, canoe, sail, and more.

**Sociability:** A good place creates interaction and social opportunities. "When you come into a really great place, you'll get great photographs," Kent said. "People are alive. They're engaged."

don't want people to think of us as stars," he said.

His enthusiasm for PPS' work is not dictated by a project's scope or high-profile nature. He speaks as passionately about a planned day-long workshop for a group in Rapid City, S.D., as he does his ongoing work with a group of real-estate developers in Dubai to create a new community — a project that will employ more than 1,000 architects.

### 'Every City Needs a Square'

Kent's affability doesn't keep him from speaking bluntly about what he perceives as the failures of those who are

charged with designing and building public spaces. In the last 70 years, he noted, traffic engineers have single-mindedly designed streets to carry more and more cars, and architects and landscape architects have devoted themselves to projects that will earn them prizes. The result? People have been pushed to the margins, Kent said.

Engineering and design professionals have become the biggest obstacles to making great places. "All these different disciplines have in a sense become their own audiences by developing awards for performing within their own discipline's guidelines," Kent said. "Designers and architects are



**MARKETING PLAN:** “Markets are an amazing force,” said Kent, who recalls visits that he made as a student to markets in Morocco and Ecuador as “life-changing.” Proof of their potency: Union Square, once considered unsafe, turned around after the establishment of a greenmarket led to a multimillion-dollar park renovation. It now draws thousands of visitors.

pressured to create work that is unique and specific and will be highlighted in their resume and the awards will follow and lead to more work.”

The results of this “look-at-me” approach to architecture are what Kent calls “dead buildings”: facades dominated by blank walls and empty sidewalks, and entrances that are nearly impossible for pedestrians to find. “We’ve lost a lot of our street life by over-designed buildings,” he said. “Wherever we go, we have to fix up some design that doesn’t work, was never meant to work, but was just meant to be a piece of architecture.”

Instead of focusing primarily on building design, “we talk about ‘the architecture of a place,’ which means that the place is important and the architecture serves that place,” Kent said. “People become the most important [element], and what they do is important, rather than how a place looks.” Good management of a space is crucial, he said. “We say it contributes to 80 percent to 90 percent of the success” of a place.

Another PPS mantra is: “The community is the expert.” People have an intuitive sense about what they need, Kent said. “We try to provide a structure to help them find out what it is.” The biggest challenge all over the world “is that every devel-

oper, every profession, and every government is afraid of civic engagement,” Kent said. “The reason is that they have their own agenda, and they have to impose those agendas on the community.

“And we’re saying, ‘Wait a minute. Why don’t you ask the communities? They will come up with a bigger vision than [professionals] will, one that will be more inclusive, more connected to what the values of that community are.’”

Although Kent and his colleagues used to have to explain to audiences what they meant when they talked about a “public place,” there now is a greater understanding of the ways in which farmer’s markets, plazas, walkable downtowns, waterfronts, and other public spaces can build communities. “Every city needs a square,” said Kent, who since June has flown to Singapore, Hong Kong, Vancouver, Las Vegas, Australia, Naples, Fla., Savannah, Ga., San Francisco, Rapid City, Dubai, Japan, the Netherlands, and Norway. His schedule skews to international destinations, Kent said, because “they are better at [focusing on place] than the United States,” which “is way behind.”

The good news, Kent said, is that a rising tide of factors — including attention to public health and obesity, transportation issues, green initiatives, and sustainable agriculture — is creating a kind of worldwide convergence around walkable, livable cities. More and more people seem to be tuning in to the fact that the ultimate goal of placemaking is happiness. “You know that you are in a really good place if you see a lot of affection,” Kent said. “You see lots of kissing in good places.” ■

► **Barbara Palmer** is senior editor of *Convene*. The Leading by Example series is sponsored by the **Canadian Tourism Commission**. Visit its Web site at [www.meetings.canada.travel](http://www.meetings.canada.travel).