

# Going Public

STEVE GARMHAUSEN

**Developing around well-thought-out public space is a concept that is catching on.**

SHORTLY AFTER THIS PAST CHRISTMAS, broker and developer David Barley approached a homeless man who resided under an oak tree on an empty block of land across from the county courthouse in Orlando, Florida. Barley gave the man \$100 in exchange for his location under the tree. Later, Barley came back with a bottle of scotch and Wesley, his retriever, to spend the night under the tree.

One might expect to find a sad story behind Barley's lonely night. In fact, he was on a research expedition. As part of the group helping to coordinate the property's redevelopment, Barley had decided to spend the night observing and listening to the sounds of movement—of automobiles, trains, pedestrians—that occurred around the property.

The exercise was a part of the approach to development popularly known as place making, of which Barley considers himself a student. Integral to creating the social nucleus that place making strives for is an understanding of the patterns of movement around a location.

Barley, who until recently represented an ownership group led by Global Group Investment, Inc., of Miami of the 5.6-acre (2.3-ha) site known as the Pizzuti block, spent countless hours building community support—talking with, wrangling, persuading some 200 stakeholders, from transit officials to politicians to the local newspaper to his fellow investors.

For help winning over those interested parties to the place-making approach, he turned to the New York-based Project for Public

Spaces (PPS). The nonprofit consulting group—which helped popularize the term place making—advocates a close understanding of the social ecology of places before starting to develop them.

The result will be a large commercial development: the \$300 million project known as 400 North Orange will contain 980,000 square feet (91,045 sq m) of office towers, condos with ground-floor restaurants, and retail space. But it will also include two acres (0.8 ha)—40 percent of the site—dedicated to activities like concerts, lounging, and croquet. Think of it as Orlando's answer to Rockefeller Plaza. Barley does.

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A large commercial development in Orlando, Florida, planned around public space rather than leftover scraps used as parks, will include two acres (0.8 ha) of open space—40 percent of the site. The \$300 million project, known as 400 North Orange, also will contain 980,000 square feet (91,045 sq m) of office towers, condos with ground-floor restaurants, and retail space.





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Outside Lincoln, Nebraska, place making has been the focus of the town square at Fallbrook Village, a 5,000-resident, 700-acre (283-ha) new urbanist community.

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The development approach being used at 400 North Orange—planning around public space rather than using leftover scraps as parks—may not be the norm, but it has gathered enough momentum for PPS to create a unit a little over a year ago dedicated to guiding developers through it.

Developing around well-thought-out public space is a concept that is catching on, and not because developers are suddenly feeling generous, says Stephen P. Peca, adjunct assistant professor at New York University and a principal of consulting firm Concourse Realty Group.

"It's a very progressive way to look at the world," he explains. "But at the same time, you're not going to do it unless there's an economic rationale behind it—and there definitely is." Peca points to mixed-use centers like Mashpee Commons in Cape Cod, and the Crossroads Shopping Center in Bellevue, Washington, that are thriving by providing

alternatives to sterile and isolated residential and business developments. "It's a natural evolution," he says. "And I don't think this is a pocket-type movement—it's happening throughout the world."

PPS, which has been around for more than 30 years, has gained notice for reviving moribund public places such as New York's Bryant Park. Now it has what might be called an early intervention unit. "Rather than trying to fix a downtown or a shopping mall that's not working, this is really about starting from scratch," says Meg Walker, the PPS vice president heading the effort. "We want to find those enlightened developers who understand how important public spaces can be to the livability of their developments as well as adding value to their property."

Fallbrook Village, a 5,000-resident, 700-acre (283-ha) new urbanist community a few minutes' drive north of Lincoln, Nebraska, has been under development for six years by Nebco Inc., a Lincoln-based construction materials and real estate firm. Planning is now underway for the village center. Nebco plans to subsidize for



several years the center's retail as well as its event programming. Tim Mettenbrink, the firm's vice president, approached PPS after struggling with the design of the village center. Because the center would be essential to attracting residents and businesses to the huge new development, Mettenbrink says he knew there was little margin for error. "The population and most of the money have moved to the south of Lincoln, so we're on the wrong side of town," he explains. "Everything we do has got to be better."

Mettenbrink set up a lunch with PPS president, Fred Kent, who, true to his reputation, pulled no punches. "He goes, 'You guys don't know what you're doing,'" recalls Mettenbrink. "You're trying to design the heck out of this thing, and that's not how it's done."

PPS first moved to get a wide slice of the community involved in the planning. It convened a brainstorming workshop early last year that was attended by 80 Fallbrook Village resi-

dents, design professionals, and current and prospective business owners.

The participants discussed the role of the village center and delved into its layout and uses. They explored circulation patterns—the very matter Barley and his dog had examined in Orlando—as well as how the uses related to each other and how the center connected to the residential neighborhood and surrounding area.

The master plan that resulted from the community's input lays out a mixed-use village center that is walkable, has the scale of a village, and is well integrated into the existing residential development. A green that is the center's focal point is envisioned as a bustling community hub, with social activity drawn in by features like a performance area, a fire pit, and a picnic and play area.

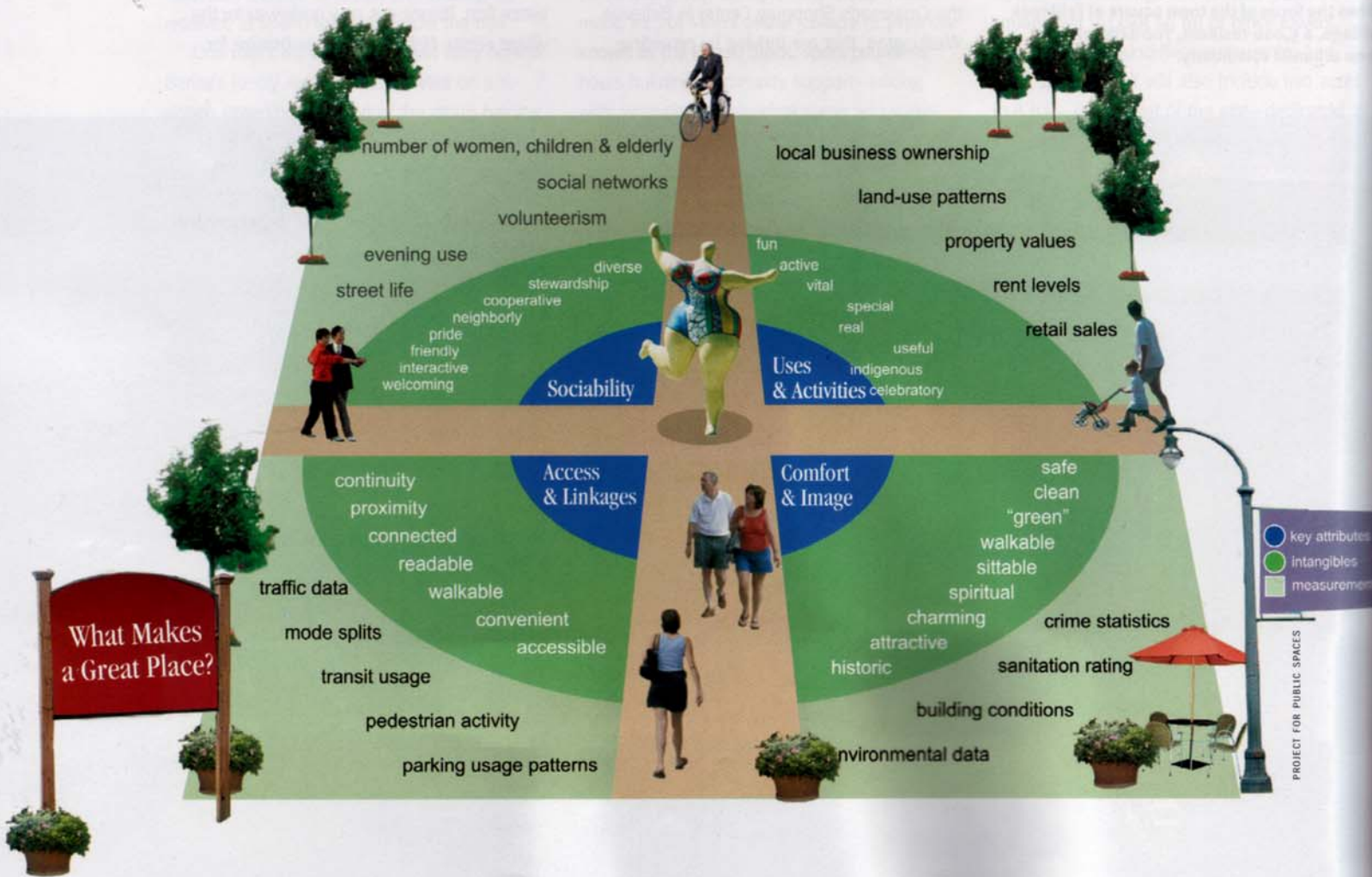
Walker impressed on the community the concept that thriving village centers owe only a fraction of their success to design. More

important are factors like the number of activities offered in order to appeal to different users, well-positioned and comfortable benches, and easy access.

"We are doing things with a very simple palette, and trying to put them together in extremely creative ways," explains Mettenbrink.

PPS's embrace of pared-back design does not always endear the group to designers and architects, admits Walker. Mettenbrink, who has been in real estate development for 27 years, but was trained as an architect, says he had to help the project's two landscape design firms adjust. "I have enough empathy for designers to help them over the hump," he notes. "I told them, 'This is going to make your life easier guys, so just run with it.'"

By elevating the pedestrian over the automobile, Lincoln-based architecture firm Sinclair Hille Architects has been a welcome challenge, says Daniel Grasso, principal of the village center project. The plan calls for elements like



parking, which is located behind the buildings around the center, narrow streets with paving stones that will slow traffic, and wide sidewalks that will facilitate outdoor seating at restaurants.

"We're extremely excited to be working on this project," Grasso says. "It's about creating a space where people can feel comfortable." And where they can celebrate: seasonal highlights, community members agreed, should include a Mardi Gras carnival, a Christmas tree lighting, and pep rallies before the University of Nebraska "Huskers" games.

In Orlando, Barley, who is president and founder of Winter Park, Florida-based Palm Beach Land Trust, aimed to create the same sort of social hub.

A seventh-generation Floridian who is so interested in public spaces that he has traveled the world studying them, Barley admits to

being "on a little bit of a crusade" to popularize place making. At the same time, he says, he is a businessman. "I have a fiduciary duty to the people who own the property," he says. "At the end of the day, it has to be something that works."

Developers and investors might be excused for being hesitant to set aside precious chunks of their property for use as public space. This is especially understandable as rising land and construction prices ratchet up the pressure for big returns, notes Scott Hall, Orlando-based senior vice president with the Pizzuti Cos. of Columbus, Ohio.

"It's tough to sit back and say, 'Our project actually becomes more valuable by having less of the site consumed,'" observes Hall, whose company sold the block last year as it pulled out of the central Florida market. "But if it's done

right, your project can command a premium, and you can end up differentiating yourself, which is critical in a competitive environment."

Barley tapped PPS in the initial stages of planning to help win the hearts and minds of the project's stakeholders through place-making presentations and workshops. "By doing this early, we got important people involved in the process, which makes a huge difference," says Barley.

The consultancy also advised the development team on the project's overall master plan—how to integrate the civic square with adjacent streets and public spaces. PPS recommended a focus on walkability and the meshing of transit into the complex: a planned mass transit hub just west of the site would enable commuters to stroll through the square on their way to or from work. As for the public land itself, PPS recommended flexible space that can be used for year-round programming.

The consulting firm espouses the idea that successful places should have ten public use "destinations." The Orlando development's planned destinations include an art walk—an outdoor gallery lined with restaurants and shaded by trees and awnings. A restaurant and game area is to include a small restaurant and a "game vendor" who will lend board and video games—to be enjoyed at movable tables—as well as croquet, volleyball, and other active games.

PPS will also help shepherd the project through its final design and construction phases to safeguard the vision. But it is after projects like 400 North Orange and Fallbrook Village are completed that the real challenge will begin, says Walker. An ongoing commitment to managing and programming the public space is far more crucial than how it is laid out, she emphasizes: "Intensive programming and partnering with civic organizations, arts groups, and performance groups are really key." **U**

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## Eleven Principles for Creating Great Community Places

1. **THE COMMUNITY IS THE EXPERT.** Identify members' talents and assets, use their perspective, and seek a sense of community ownership.
2. **CREATE A PLACE, NOT A DESIGN.** A strong sense of community and a comfortable image are the goals.
3. **LOOK FOR PARTNERS.** Museums, schools, and other local institutions can provide invaluable support to help get a project off the ground.
4. **OBSERVE.** Analyze existing public spaces with an eye toward why they do or do not work.
5. **HAVE A VISION.** Imagine specific activities occurring in a comfortable, significant place that makes the community proud.
6. **START WITH THE PETUNIAS: EXPERIMENT, EXPERIMENT, EXPERIMENT.** The best spaces experiment with short-term improvements that can be tested and refined over many years.
7. **TRIANGULATE.** Bring at least three elements together, for example, a children's reading room in a library, a children's playground in a park, and a food kiosk will attract more users than each on its own.
8. **THEY ALWAYS SAY, "IT CAN'T BE DONE."** Be ready for obstacles, and remember one of Yogi Berra's great sayings: "If they say it can't be done, it doesn't always work out that way."
9. **FORM SUPPORTS FUNCTION.** The concept for a space is more important than the design.
10. **MONEY IS NOT THE ISSUE.** Benefits can outweigh the costs when the community and other partners are involved.
11. **YOU ARE NEVER FINISHED.** Good public spaces respond to the changing needs of the community. Be open to those changes.

*(This is a synopsis of the Project for Public Spaces' 11 key elements to transform public spaces into vibrant places.)*