

The Place Maker



In these difficult economic times, can we afford to invest time and money in creating special places for our city?

According to international place making expert Fred Kent, we can't afford *not* to. In fact, Kent says that place making is a cost-effective way to revive prosperity through alternative economic and urban growth.



“Paying serious attention to places represents a breakthrough for our society. It can spark genuine progress in how we govern ourselves, how we are involved in our communities, how streets and public spaces feel to us, how we shop, work, play and socialise with our friends.

“Rather than being hampered by the global downturn, this trend could be strengthened as people look closer to home to take advantage of all things local: producing local food; promoting local businesses; preserving local character; protecting local open space and public places; and finding meaningful ways to belong to a local community.”

As founder and president of Project for Public Spaces (PPS), Kent is known throughout the world as one of the foremost thinkers in livability, smart growth and the future of the city. Based in New York but active throughout the world, PPS is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build stronger communities.

Kent has spent the last 30 years as an advocate for creating places that draw people in to sit, laugh, socialise and linger a while. He has thousands of photos of places around the world that he uses to illustrate what makes a good and bad public space. Essentially, he says it comes down to whether the people in them seem relaxed and happy. People will tell you by their behaviour what they like, what they don't like, and what they want. Place making is the art of recognising, translating and implementing this to create successful destinations.

“Place making draws on the unique assets inherent in each and every community,” Kent explains. “It recognises community members’ deep knowledge about the place they call home, ushering in a sense of collective pride and ownership. Using these strengths to work toward common goals involves everyone in the process and results in high quality projects that succeed both commercially and socially.”

Recognising the success of place making principles around the world, EPRA recently invited Kent and PPS Senior Vice President Kathy Madden to Perth to provide counsel on how our planners, government and industry can transform our ailing public areas into places that are treasured by young and old. After walking the beat through our streets, malls and parks, Kent and Madden are optimistic about our city’s ability to rise above the current economic slump.

“It is important to point out some of the wonderful qualities that exist in Perth. It is a city that reveals itself as you begin to discover all of the hidden places that give it character and make it unique,” says Kent.

“One of Perth’s best qualities is its human scale which is evident on many levels, from the size of the streets to the spaces that connect them. For example, both Hay and Murray Streets are very comfortable streets for walking. And the arcades and shopping corridors that connect the two have the potential to make the city one of the best urban centres anywhere.”

While he praises Perth’s urban core and recognises that the city features some attractive destinations, Kent says there are significant opportunities to enhance the overall vitality of the area.



Photograph by Johannes Reinhart

“A great district has at least 10 great places that define people’s experience and are dynamic enough to attract a range of user groups, keep people coming back, and keep evolving.”

– Fred Kent

“PPS contends that a great place needs to have at least ten things to do in it, or ten reasons to be there – we call this ‘The Power of Ten’. This might include a place to sit, art to see, water to touch, food to eat or history to learn about – it all depends on what appeals to the people that would use the space.

“The principle then follows that a great district has at least ten great places that define people’s experience and are dynamic enough to attract a range of user groups, keep people coming back, and keep evolving.

“To complete the concept of ‘The Power of Ten’, a great city needs at least ten great districts or destinations, each with ten places and ten things to do in each place.”

Based on this place making strategy, Kent says Perth could improve key existing spaces and add new ones so that there is a network of successful, well-functioning public spaces throughout the city.

“With the goal of becoming a city of well-linked destinations, I believe Perth needs to expand people’s perceptions of the size of the downtown area, enhance and create additional city destinations such as Kings Park and Forrest Place, and transform the cultural district into a thriving, year-round destination that draws patrons from each side of the train station.”

Drawing on great waterfront cities around the world, Kent also offers an opinion on what is perhaps Perth’s greatest asset and most controversial development opportunity.

“Creating a great urban waterfront could be the biggest opportunity the city has or will ever have in the future. The execution of a waterfront plan should be seen as part of a larger campaign with a broad vision around well-connected public destinations, a transit access plan and a plan for increasing residential use to lay the groundwork for a major development strategy for Perth.”

Kent’s views are echoed by Australia’s own leading authority on place making, President of Place Leaders Association Malcolm Snow.

“Like many other Australian cities, Perth has huge potential to reinforce its distinctive and unique qualities. I believe this is the real challenge of place making – to reinforce city character and structure by understanding and interpreting the sense of place that marks each environment as being different from any other place,” Snow says.

But how can all this happen when both the private and public sector are tightening their purse strings? Snow sees a silver lining to the current economic storm clouds. “It raises the bar in terms



Photograph by Tony Sealzo, courtesy of the Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority.

of the design challenge. But I believe that this is a good thing as it means those who have that responsibility think more strategically about how they can ensure they are creating flexibility for the public domain to be adaptable, irrespective of the economic conditions.

“It is absolutely critical that at a time when we need to continue priming a faltering economy through investment in urban infrastructure that government and the private sector focus on developing places that are not merely commercially sound but can also incorporate facilities and activities that make them very appealing.”

And like Kent, Snow believes there is a growing recognition that spending money on making attractive, effective destinations is a smart investment.

“We’re seeing a reinvestment in cities, certainly at a capital city level but also in key regional cities around Australia. I believe this is happening because governments are recognising both the economic and social return on investment that comes from creating places that become attractive destinations.

“A big part of determining what makes an attractive destination is in the hands of the community – after all, they are the ultimate users of the places we create. I have seen some beautiful places that are ultimately not well used because the user has been excluded from the design process. Through constructive input from community members, designers can capture these good ideas and ensure there is real ownership in both the process and the outcome. This is how successful place making is achieved.”

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Kent’s parting word on the subject drives home the necessity for strong partnerships between the community, government and industry.

“When resources are tight, we must be clear about our priorities. That means drawing upon the wisdom of the community as a whole to set those goals, making the most of your best assets and developing partnerships to get things done. This is how you can ensure that your community will thrive even in these uncertain times.”