

# *A Different Take on the Design Process*

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**Project** for Public Spaces (PPS) was founded in 1975 with the mission to “create and sustain public spaces that build communities.” This program furthers the research of William Whyte, author of *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, by consulting with communities on public space improvement projects, hosting workshops, publishing a variety of written materials, and offering training so others may learn their methodology.

## *PPS's Principles of Creating Great Places*

### Underlying Ideas

1. The community is the expert
2. Create a place, not a design
3. Look for partners
4. They always say “It can’t be done”

### Planning and Outreach Techniques

5. You can see a lot just by observing
6. Have a vision

### Translating Ideas into Action

7. Form supports function
8. Triangulate

### Implementation

9. Start with the petunias
10. Money is not the issue
11. You are never finished

In October of 2006, I attended a PPS seminar in New York City entitled “How to Turn a Place Around.” For a place to be successful, it has to engage the users. The best way to accomplish this is for the community to be involved in the entire design process even before the inception of a specific project, and it is important that the ideas for change originate with those users and local stakeholders. The community members are experts about their area and know what they need. Furthermore, as their ideas are developed, they take ownership of the process, become supporters of change, and are more likely to take future action.

PPS has identified eleven Principles of Creating Great Places. These concepts are essential to the place-based design process and can be classified into four groups: underlying ideas, planning and outreach techniques, translating ideas into actions, and implementation.

**Underlying Ideas:** The community is the expert. The community knows what it needs and wants, and it is up to the designers to help facilitate the process. You are creating a place – not a design. How it functions is more important than a clean concept. You can’t do it alone. All the stakeholders need to be involved throughout the whole process. They are the ones who will be making it happen and keeping it going. They always say it can’t be done. Focus on what the community wants, not the roadblocks to the process. As the saying goes, “where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

**Planning and Outreach Techniques:** You can see a lot just by observing. Pay attention to what is going on and how the people are using the site. Ideally, the observation should be long-term, on different days of the week, and at different times of the day. Develop a vision. Help the users define what they want, so they can keep that in mind as they move forward.

**Translating Ideas into Action:** Form supports function. The function and activity are critical, and the form should always support that function. Triangulate. Give people something to watch and talk about and cluster the activity. Street performers, other people, and children all allow individuals to start conversations and break down barriers.

**Implementation:** Start with the petunias. Small, easily attainable projects can build momentum and give identifiable results while the larger projects are being developed. Money is not the issue. If the public is behind a project and it is good for the community then money can be found. Do not let the apparent lack of money get in the way of great projects. You are never finished. Places have to grow and change with the community, and living places must be continually evaluated for what works and what does not.

As a landscape architect, I learned many things from my two days with the staff of PPS including the following: People matter. The most creative, award-winning design will not be effective if it does not meet the needs of the users. The best way to find out what the people need is to ask them -- not what they think about a given project, but what they think before the project starts. Find out what will improve their lives and do that.

Places need activities. Places do not draw people - people draw people. Coffee kiosks, newsstands, sandwich carts, dog parks, street-corner musicians, and farmers' markets all bring people to a place, and success becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. People like to watch people, and people will tend to gather where things are happening.

Visibility is important. In order to feel safe, people need to be able to see what is going on around them. Visibility also allows people walking or driving by to know what is happening within the park or other public space, and invites them in to participate.

Seating is essential. People need places to sit. These places need to be in the sun, in the shade, in private, and in the middle of the activity. It is amazingly difficult for a designer to be able to meet all of these needs with fixed seating that is why moveable chairs play such a huge part in successful spaces. Moveable chairs

allow people flexibility in making the seats their own and arranging them to meet the needs of individuals or groups. If people can choose where to sit, they are more comfortable, and will stay longer.

Project for Public Spaces has a very different approach than what is often taught, one that is focused on the



Photo: PPS

users rather than on the design of a space. In my experience as a landscape architect, I think that a user-friendly, utilitarian focus is an important part that is often missing from most design processes.

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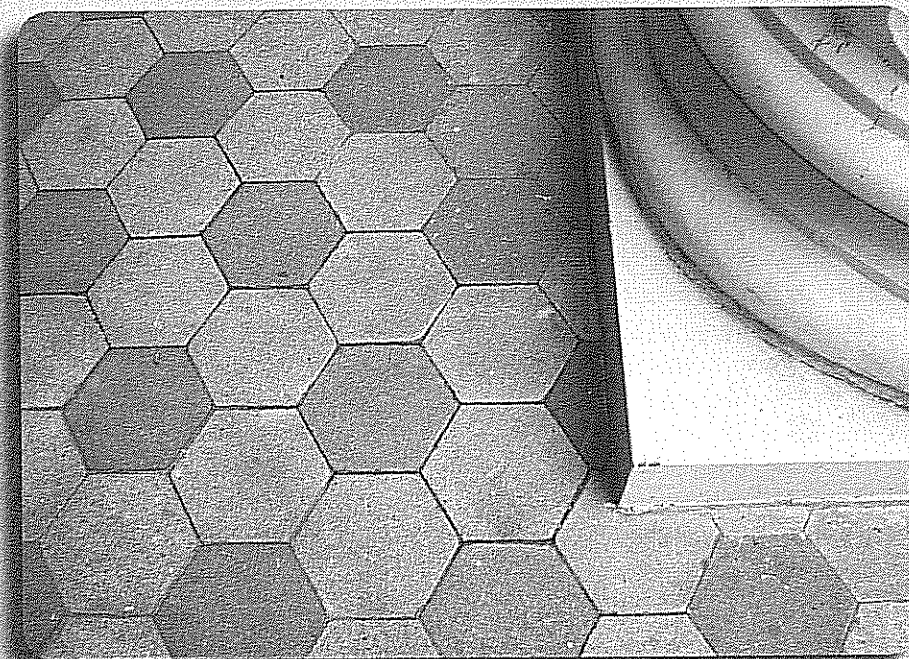


Photo: Sheldon Owens

*Holmes-Hunter Academic Building*