

Creating Places:

How Transportation can Make Great Places

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What we're going to talk about today is how you create places. Creating places is a totally different way of thinking about how you build communities.



How do you create a place? Lets look at some images that show what we've been doing wrong, and right, in our communities.



This is a Philip Johnson building in Houston Texas, and next to it is a human being. The president of the bank hates this building because people feel uncomfortable coming in there to do their banking.

At PPS we say that between the traffic engineers and the architect they've created an almost pedestrian-free environment.

This photograph is of the Rue Mouffetard in Paris. This street has looked like this for two hundred years. It is a place that you can go to every day and see something different each time.

We don't build places like this, in fact we're a little afraid of them. However, it is these kinds of places that are so full of energy.





This is a street in Copenhagen. It took me a long time to get this picture because no-one walks on streets like this. It looks perfect, the trees are perfect, this little piece of art is perfect, it's almost surreal.

This is a library in Boston, again by Philip Johnson. It perfectly encapsulates what Holly Whyte meant when he wrote that “Blank walls are an end in themselves; they proclaim the power of the institution, the inconsequence of the individual, whom they are clearly meant to put down, if not intimidate.”





And this building in Houston also is designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill has a setback to hide the uses. It proclaims “neat, clean and empty,” “look but don’t touch,” “no people, no problem.”

Put these five men around one of the columns in the last photo—would they still be smiling or would they be loitering?





A Pritzker Prize-winning architect designed this library in San Antonio.

This library in Riverside California has never won any architecture awards.





This is the bus-stop in San Antonio in front of the library.

This is the bus-stop in front of the library in Riverside.





This is the entranceway that you have to come in if you come from the bus-stop in San Antonio.

This is the entranceway to the non-award winning building in Riverside where you can have concerts on the front porch.





This is the park in the award-winning library.

This is the park in the non-award winning library. Located next to a museum, a church, and to the old city hall, it's an extraordinary place and it's the civic center of that community.



I don't think any civic events could go on here. This is a church, a Catholic church in Arvada, Colorado and I was standing here with a pastor and he was looking out over his domain and he's going to get rid of the two houses in the foreground to expand his parking.



I was thinking of a church in a thousand miles to the south in Mexico City.





It is a Catholic church surrounded by an extraordinary public space, that had this beautiful entranceway into a park with a fountain.





In that park you can find people doing all kinds of things...

We went up to Montpelier, Vermont and evaluated this little stretch of their commercial district. This is a General Services Administration building, mainly it's the town's post office. It is next to an old courthouse, a movie theater and an old historic building.



This building is clearly the ugliest building in Montpelier, probably in the whole state of Vermont.

When you look at it the first thing you think about is “can we do a façade improvement?” We asked people what they wanted to do to improve the space and they said what they wanted was a place to hitch their dog, a picnic table to open their mail, a coffee cart, a community bulletin board....

...and they wanted to take out these silly trees because they just blocked the window, they wanted a trellis because it gets hot there in the summertime and they wanted to take the screen off the windows so that they could see in and out.

Then they wanted some angled parking right in front so that they could get in and out easily. So instead of doing the façade, we created a place, in the front of that building.





When I first started working for William Whyte we perched at 57th Street and Lexington Avenue in New York City and studying that one block for a summer.

I went in to talk to the owner of the antique store and I said, “You have thirty-five thousand people going by your shop every day. You must like your location.” He said “No I don’t like the location because I’m right next to a bank and people start walking faster as they go by the bank and it takes them two or three stores to get back into a window-shopping rhythm.”



What that says is that the whole rhythm of a street, from a pedestrian or community or human point of view, is critical to how people use a space, how they feel about a place.

When you think about great streets, look at them more holistically. Think about how they function as a place, how they work to keep the attention of people.



I absolutely believe, without any hesitation that transportation can transform communities all across America and all around the world

In 1954 Jane Jacobs wrote a book called “The Death and Life of Great American Cities.” In it she said “The erosion of cities by automobiles proceeds as a kind of nibbling. Small nibbles at first but eventually hefty bites. A street is widened here, another is straightened there, a wide avenue is turned-is converted to one way flow and more land goes into parking. No one step in this process is in itself crucial but cumulatively the effect is enormous.”



Let's look at some examples of that process in action.

This is Peachtree Street in Atlanta. I was at a meeting here and people offered to drive me across the street.





We were coming out of a meeting on George Street in Sydney Australia and these poor ladies wanted to cross the road to go to the store on the other side and the road was one hundred feet to the intersections.

So how do we keep this from happening in the first place? Or turn a place around?

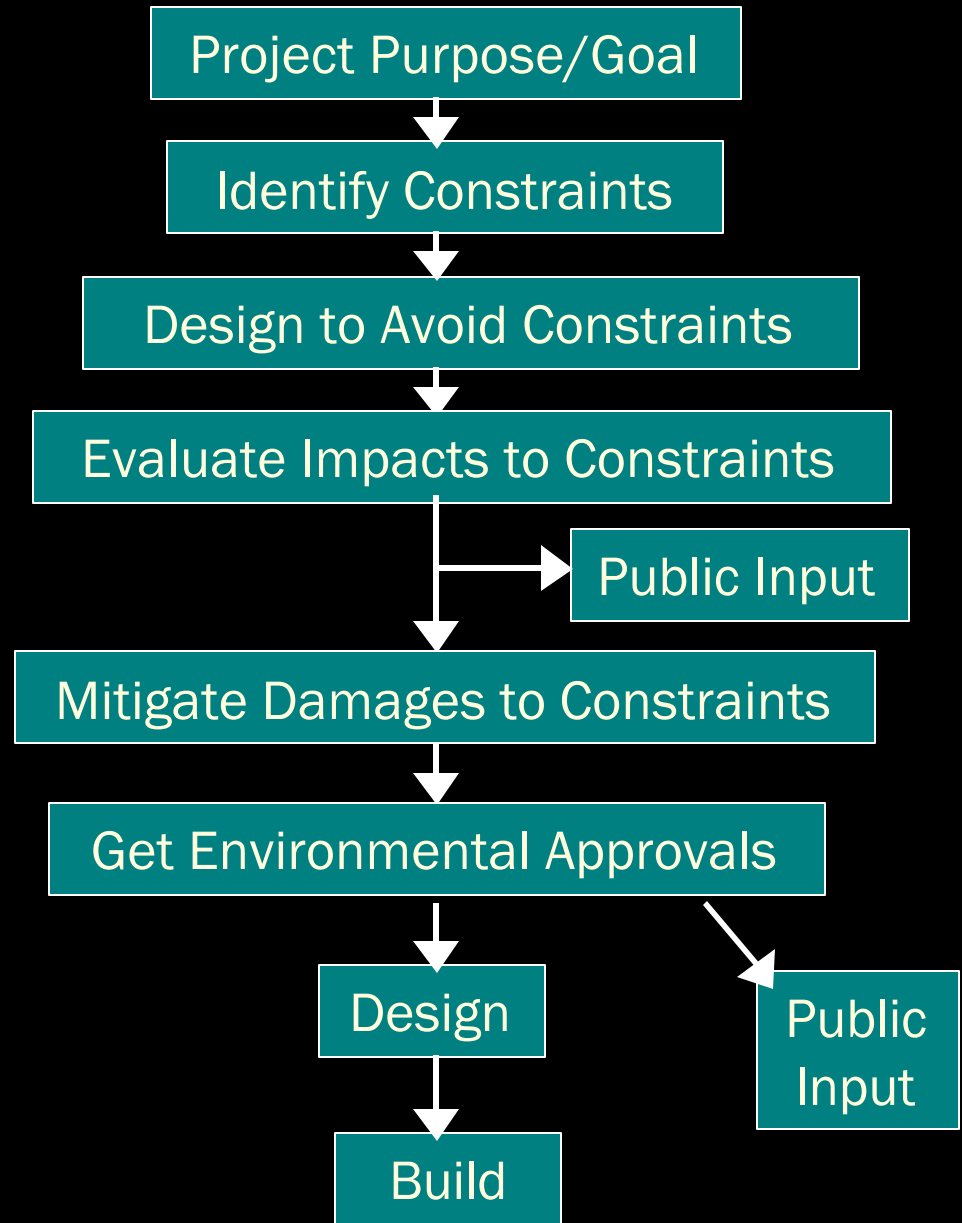


NEPA Project-Driven Approach

This the NEPA Process with which you're all familiar. This approach begins with a project. There is a statement of purpose and need, then you identify the constraints.

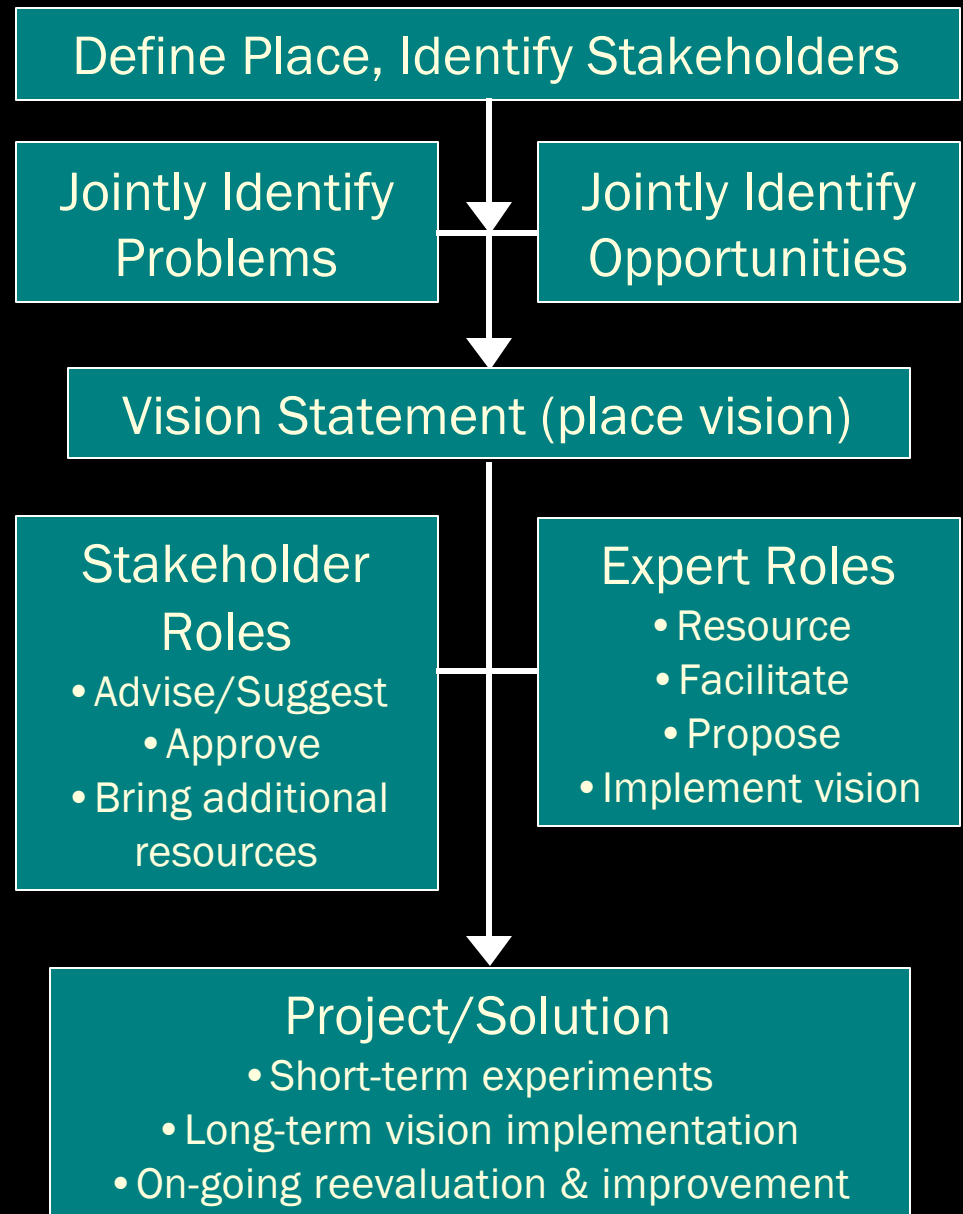
You design to avoid the constraints, you evaluate the impacts of the constraints, then you get public input, you mitigate the damages to constraints, you get environmental approvals, you get public input, then you design and build.

Now what this is all says is that you're going to end up with something a lot worse than what you started out with.

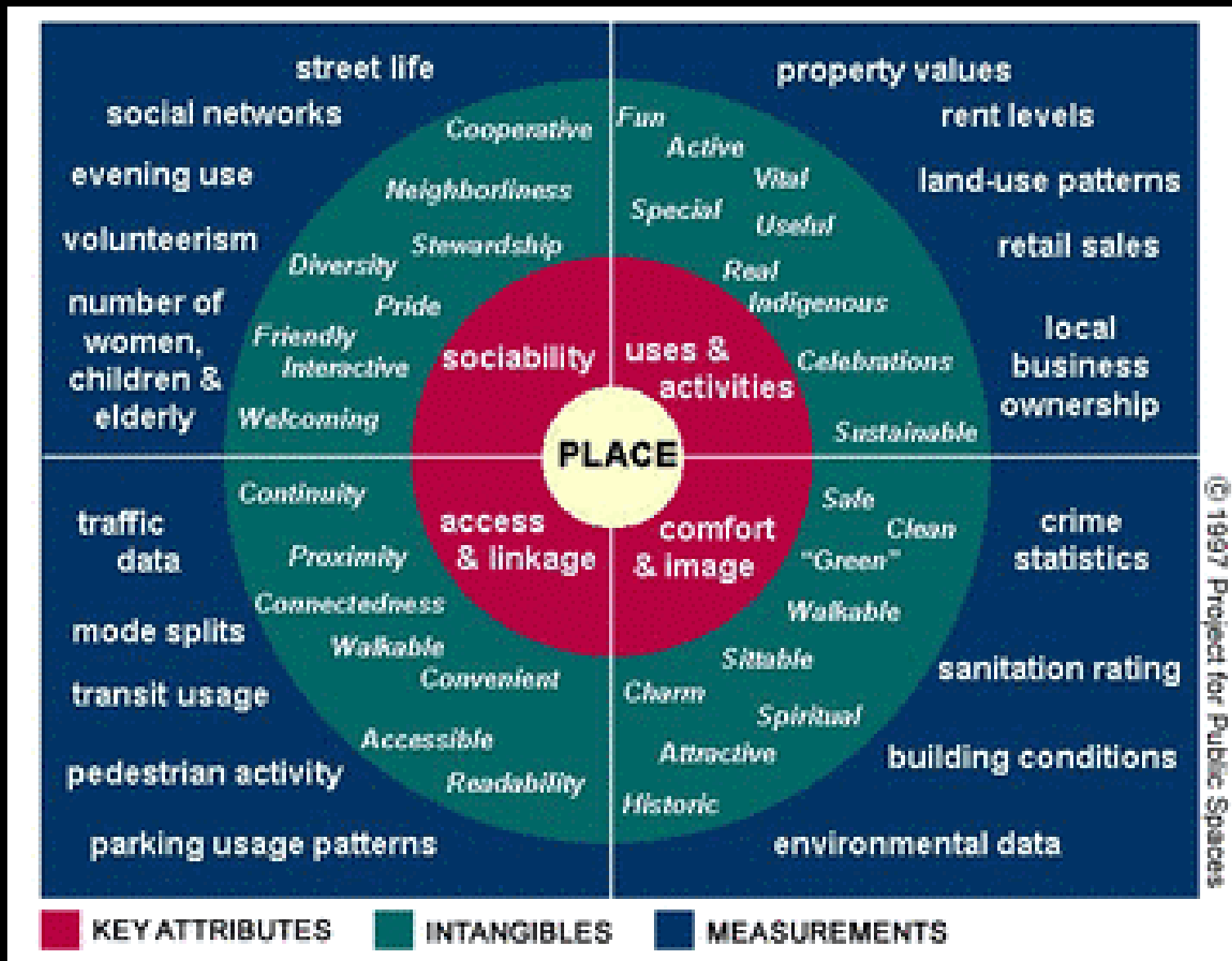


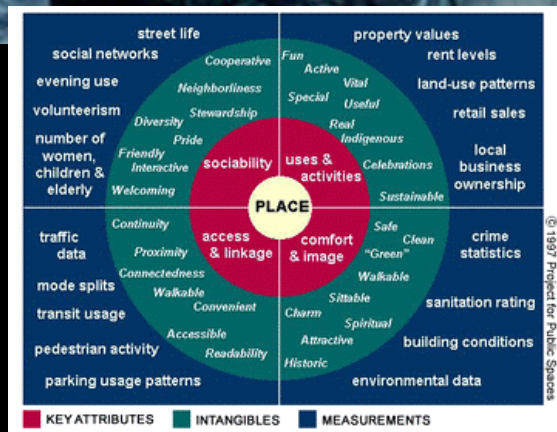
Place/Community-Driven Approach

Try the other approach, a place-driven approach. Jointly identify the problems with the community. Jointly identify the opportunities. Have a vision statement. The stakeholder's roles are to suggest and to approve, the expert's roles are to facilitate and to be a resource. Implement short-term experiments and long-term vision all the while conducting an ongoing reevaluation.



When you talk to communities, the issue becomes, How do we create a place?



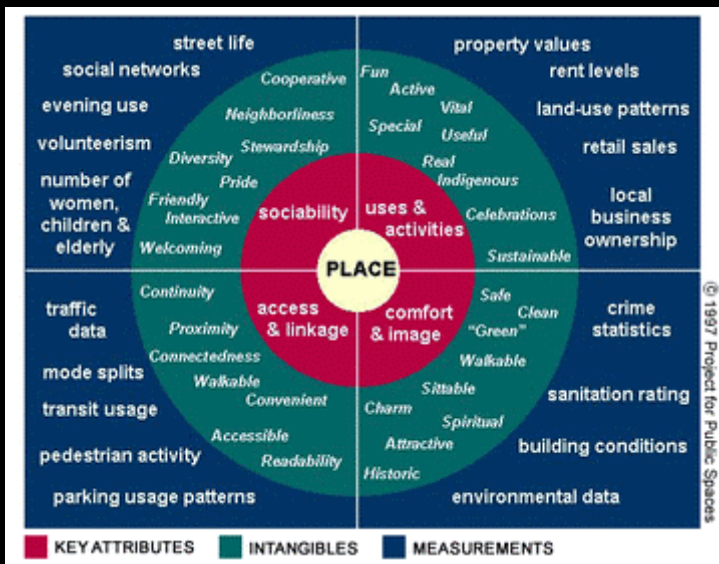


Access

One major characteristic is access and linkages: is it welcoming, convenient, legible, enticing, connected?



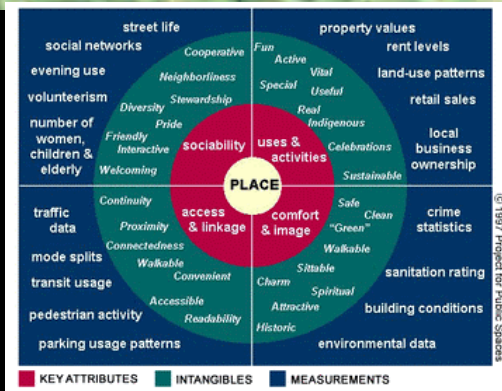
In terms of access, look at those issues from all perspectives being able to get across the street, other kinds of transit that would get you there.





Sociability

Sociability is the most important of the four place elements. How can you tell if a place is sociable? Are people cooperative, neighborly, friendly, diverse, caring? Is there storytelling?



Affection, which falls under sociability, is the true sign of success of a public space.





When you travel as much as we do, you see the amazing transformations that some cities have undergone to keep or reestablish their communities.

One lesson from these cities is that it is possible to allow cars, pedestrians and bicyclists to coexist





For example, when an arterial comes into a community we should transform the road rather than transforming the community.



This is one of the highest performing roads in Dusseldorf, very narrow, very tight, very easy to cross, comfortable for pedestrians, but also extremely viable from an economic point of view to the point that they even take parking spaces out for that and then the show is the sidewalk, and they double-load the sidewalk with vendors and shops and food and that is the place to go, that's the "place to be" in that community.



This is another one in Denmark, in a place called Koge. Their standards for road design in communities are seventeen feet – they don't do one way roads, they do two-way roads--and this road is seventeen feet from curb to curb. They design roads for specific purposes and bicyclists and pedestrians are part of the road.





Also in Denmark they've done some of the most amazing roundabouts. I stood next to this roundabout for a while and I watched. These kids very comfortably came running or bicycling around.





I thought “No engineer in America is going to like this because no truck could ever get through here” and lo and behold this truck came along at about five miles an hour and went through. So even I was a disbeliever until I saw it.





Look at the thoughtfulness of this design. It is about creating a very comfortable place for all kinds of users to participate in.

And when you take it further they used to have four lane roads and they've cut them down to two lanes and they have added pedestrians and bicycles and they have improved the intersections to make it comfortable for all the users – bicycle lanes are often on the street instead of on the roadway, and-and so on.



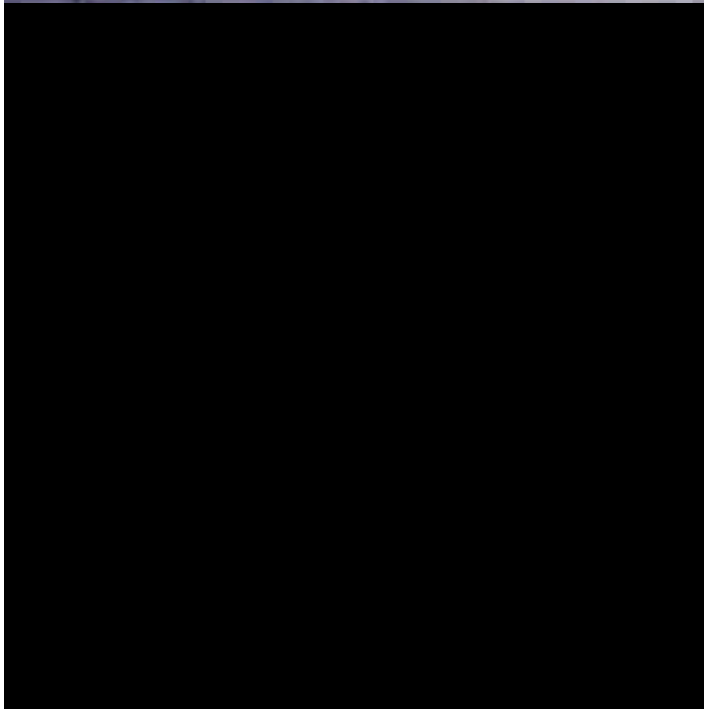
How do you design a street in a very pedestrian-friendly area?

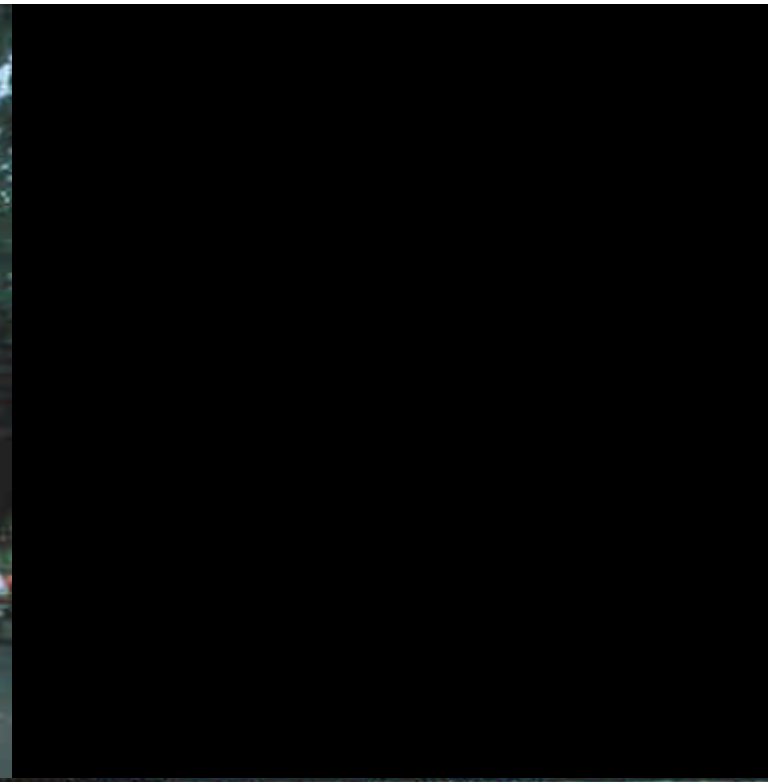
You can do work with bollards—as they do back on Rue Mouffetard in Paris.





Or you can do what we did in New Haven. This is right across from Yale University.





All we did was create this tiny little space right on the corner by bulging out the curb and narrowing the lanes to nine and a half feet. That's all we did.





You never would get a design award for this but look what happened to that space. It became full of people, and they started selling newspapers there.





In Washington DC the only people working on this intersection were the traffic engineers, and we were working with a business improvement district and a church, the Inter-American Development Bank and the Women's Museum we created this vision for a place.

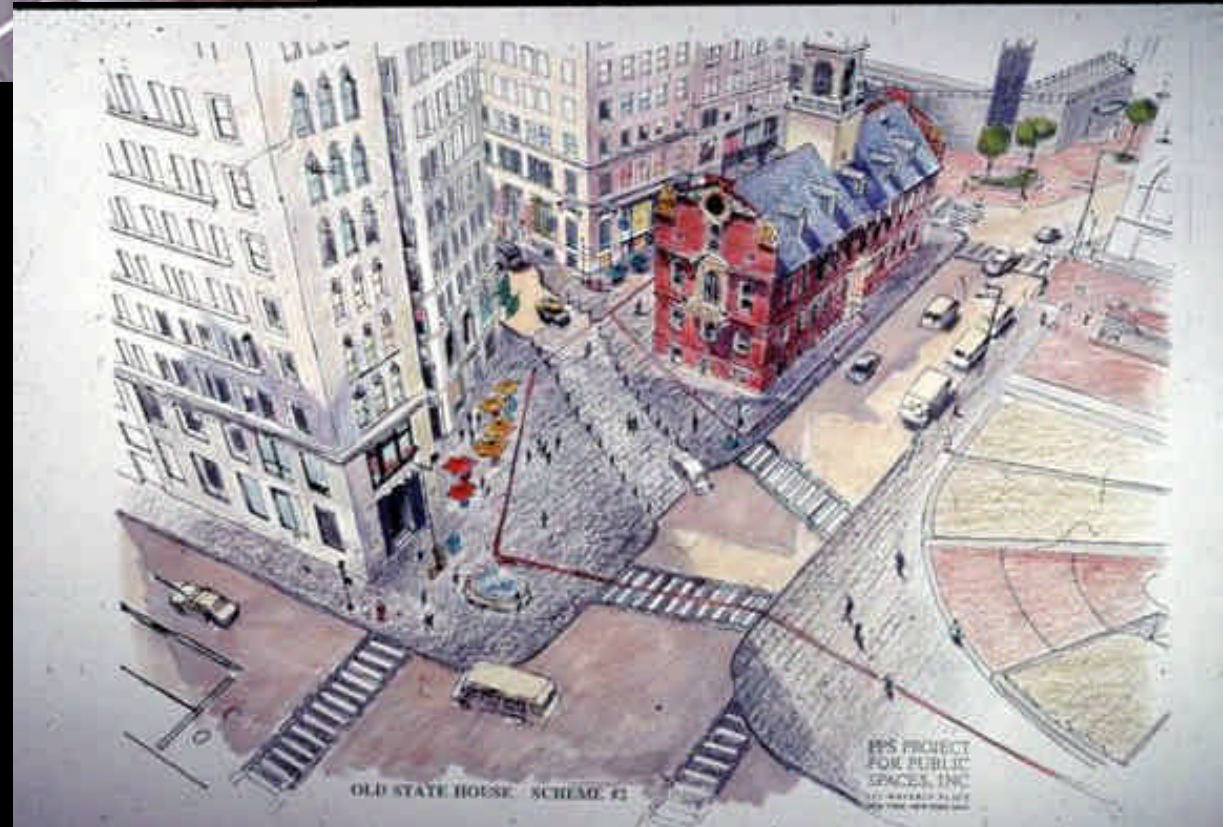
There is no agency in the city government that deals with the public realm, it's the parks department and the traffic engineers that deal with public spaces.





In Boston working with the traffic department, we took them out to this location right here and they didn't like standing there, this was the site of the first Boston massacre and there was almost another one with the traffic department.

We took them all over the downtown and they became pedestrians again and realized what an enormous amount of space was available to improve the pedestrian spaces in the city if you just looked at use and tried to create that sense of place.





In Tallahassee there were eighty people in favor of putting angle parking on this street, two against it: the state traffic engineer and the city traffic engineer.

The city traffic engineer was fired, and the governor implemented this, it actually improved safety, it slowed vehicles down even though there was no attempt to slow the traffic down, there was no entranceway treatment that would've created the impression that you were coming into something. So it works even though the engineers that did it didn't want it to work.





And in New York we worked on this recently where this intersection right in front of Saint Vincent's Hospital was a very dangerous intersection, in fact there was a child killed right here: six lanes virtually with traffic getting back into four lanes you can imagine the aggressive driving.

So by re-striping and putting these bollards in there it was four into four and just recently they've completed the improvements.



“I end then in praise of small spaces, the multiplier effect is tremendous, it is not just the number of people using them but the larger number who pass by and enjoy them vicariously. Or even the larger number who feel better about the city center for the knowledge of them. Because for a city such places are priceless whatever the cost. They are built with a set of basics and they are right in front of our noses if we will look.”

– William H. Whyte





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