

## MAKING PLACES

News & Ideas from Project for Public Spaces

November 2007: Civic Institutions

### Leading from the Ground Up

How Civic Institutions Can Play a Pivotal Role in Improving Communities

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*Partners for Livable Communities--a Washington D.C. based nonprofit that works on how cultural and civic organizations can step up to help improve life in America's neighborhoods--talks with PPS about how museums, churches, libraries, colleges and arts organizations are reaching beyond their walls to work with communities.*

"Two kinds of stories are told about communities today. One involves growth, revitalization, and prosperity; the other, poverty, despair and decline. Children and the aging population are at the top of America's list of urgent domestic concerns. Closely related and not far behind are the enduring challenges created by the nation's multiracial/multicultural society and the long standing but seemingly receding objective of adequate and affordable housing in decent neighborhoods for all Americans."

Robert McNulty, President of Partners, sees an immense opportunity right now to harness the power of place and the power of culture to spark a community renaissance, which would result in narrowing economic and social gaps among Americans. "We want to level the playing field so that people of any age, any background, any income can participate in and enjoy their community."

"Traditional institutions such as libraries, churches, universities, community colleges, museums, zoos, aquariums, botanic gardens and arts and humanities agencies can take on new roles of social service and economic development, becoming new resources for a caring community which focuses on daycare, race relations, educational excellence, neutrality and regional cooperation."

"These institutions can become 'Fulcrums of Change' in providing leadership to address the next generation of civic problems," McNulty offers.

"These institutions need to be redefined more broadly as community-wide institutions," agrees Fred Kent, President of PPS, "that have a physical facility/public space that is part of the larger neighborhood they are in, and a program that involves the community. Both the physical facility and the neighborhood it is placed in need to merge--and to partner with other institutions that are part of that community."

"But we also need to be careful about who we define as the community--the low-income track does not serve everybody. It isolates the immigrant community behind a vale of poverty, instead of as a culture of pride and significance that needs to be part of the larger community, on an equal basis."

"No community institution can be the same anymore," Kent goes on to say. "They have to become conveners, providing a place to bring people together. The library, the museum, any public institution should become the central square of that community. And not just with the building itself but with all that's around it. The inside must be woven into the outside. If you go to Paris or Vienna and visit the city hall, you will always see something going on. They're full of life and activity. That's a model for us."

"Public institutions are developing new ways of positioning themselves within their broader community and starting to play different roles than in the past--and they are doing this in many ways. One way is by location. By choosing to locate adjacent to other related institutions, ideally in city centers, they can create a broader destination resulting in increased attendance. For example, instead of a library, post office, school, church or museum being built as a stand alone structure many institutions are seeing themselves as part of a broader whole, where the activities they generate build off each other and create a stronger overall impact."

"These institutions are also undertaking programs that go beyond their traditional mission to reach broader audiences by offering a range of related community services and forming unique partnerships. Many are also beginning to use the outdoor space as a way of connecting to the community on both a conceptual and also a physical level. Many see the great potential of using their public spaces more effectively as a way of leveraging more public activities, and the result has been astounding--in terms of their catalytic role in communities."



To make a positive impact on their communities, civic institutions are paying closer attention to public spaces.

"Give people a gathering place," McNulty says. "The library can be where young people and seniors come to hang out. The museum can offer classes and concerts. Arts organizations can step right out into the streets and connect with the community."



"Cynthia Nikitin, vice-president in charge of PPS's Downtowns and Public Buildings program, stresses the importance of these kinds of public activities in strengthening communities. "The success of a public place is 80 percent programming," she points out. "A concert hall or YMCA would fail if it wasn't programmed. It's the same with public spaces. People won't just show up, as if by magic, when there's nothing to do there."

"Even the National Mall in Washington, D.C., surrounded by one of the greatest collection of museums in the world, attracts few people to stop and sit unless there is music or a festival or other public event."

"The role of civic institutions in improving communities was once conventional wisdom, which we lost sight of in the increasingly individualized ethos of the post-World War II era. Andrew Carnegie, the turn-of-the-20th-century steel magnate who amassed a huge fortune through tough-fisted business practices, also built 2500 public libraries around the world as a response to the widening class gap of his own era. The first Carnegie libraries were built with attractions like gymnasiums, boxing rings and swimming pools," McNulty notes, "with the idea that it would attract people that you could then expose to books."

A variety of organizations across the country are showing how civic and cultural organizations can play a central role in boosting their communities and challenging these social problems.

- \* A counterproductive town/gown tension erupted in San Jose, California, even though the campus of San Jose State University was adjacent to downtown. Local residents did not feel welcome on the campus and the positive potential of interaction was stymied. That all changed when a new central public library was built right on the university grounds.

- \* Arbitration hearings between landlords and tenants in San Jose are now held in park centers, places where low-income people feel more comfortable than the formal surroundings of city hall or a courthouse.

- \* Parks in Austin, Texas, appoint a respected member of the nearby neighborhoods as a docent to welcome people and make sure park programs run smoothly and fulfill their mission. In the summer months, parks in low-income areas take over from the schools in serving free lunches.

- \* In Arlington County, Virginia, all fire stations now feature a medical center where people can drop in for routine health check-ups.

- \* Many churches in Baltimore now host exercise classes and diet programs because obese women expressed concern about exercising in health clubs or private weight-loss centers. A coalition of predominantly African-American Baltimore churches is also exploring the idea of hosting after-school mentoring programs.

- \* Northern Michigan University in Marquette on the state's remote Upper Peninsula also offers vocational programs where local people can get their plumbing or beautician license. And those part-time students receive all the privileges of four-year students including access to sports facilities, the library and extracurricular programs.

- \* In Medellín, Colombia, a city once notorious as a den of international drug traffickers, local officials sought to restore the social fabric by building well-equipped, beautifully designed libraries in shantytowns that function as all-around civic centers.

\* In St. Louis, a landmark project is underway where some public schools are being reconfigured from the ground up as institutions for the whole community, not just for kids. Among the ideas being considered are health clinics, classes and training for jobseekers as well as evening and weekend hours for meeting rooms, sports facilities, libraries and other amenities.

\* The Botanic Gardens in Cheyenne, Wyoming--which Senator Alan Simpson calls the most important institution in town--has just one professional staff member, but makes a big impact on the community thanks to an ambitious network of volunteers, ranging from retired people to youths doing community service through the court system to people with physical and mental disabilities. They bring landscaping and beautification to many public spaces in the area. Their motto: Growing People with Plants.

\* The Houston Museum of Fine Arts reached out to nearby Latino and African-American communities with the question: What role can the museum play in people's lives. The community response was a modest request. Could we use your facilities for public school events like graduation ceremonies and PTA meetings. But this turned out to be a crucial first step in connecting the museum with the people who live nearby.

\* Across the US (and internationally) Mothers' Centers offer another inspiring example of how local institutions can foster positive improvement in their communities. More than 40 now exist around the country, with a particular concentration in Long Island where the idea first surface 30 years ago. Organized by the mother's themselves, they are housed primarily in neighborhood churches and libraries. "Some people say mothers' centers have saved their lives," notes Linda Juergens, Program Director of the Mother Centers in the US. "Parents realize they are not alone. They understand there are people they can turn to. They can get the information they need."

*Project for Public Spaces is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build stronger communities. Founded in 1975, they have worked in over 2,000 communities in 26 countries around the world.*

*Partners for Livable Communities is a non-profit organization founded in 1977 by a consortium of non-profit groups (including Project for Public Spaces). They work to improve the livability of communities by promoting quality of life, economic development, and social equity.*