A Follow Up Discussion of Max Musicant's Article: "From Dangerous to Destination in 30 Days: 6 Steps to Creating Safer Spaces."

About this discussion.

A few weeks ago The ADRR republished -- https://theadrr.com/#post-3912 -- a very interesting article by Max Muscant on a very important topic, "From Dangerous to Destination in 30 Days: 6 Steps to Creating Safer Spaces." The articles The ADRR publishes are intended to start or further inform discussions about important subjects in the downtown revitalization field. Periodically, it holds an email discussion on one of these articles, with the transcript being published at a later date. Such a discussion is presented here on Max's article. Participants include Jerome Barth, Andy Manshel, David Milder and Max Musicant.

N David Milder. Editor, The ADRR; President of DANTH, Inc.

Are Grievances and Problems the Same? I initially thought that Max's argument for turning fear ridden places into destinations by starting with a goal, not a grievance was clear to me. Yes, they could – and have – led to quite different outcomes. But then his use of the words grievance and problem interchangeably in the same paragraph did not ring right to me. Grievances are usually associated with a complaint against an unfair or unjust act. It is value laden. Problems are not. They tend to be a question in search of a solution or discussion. People who have problems often act very differently than those who have grievances.

Misbehaving teenagers in a park are cited as an example of a grievance situation, with those affronted by their behaviors being the aggrieved. I do not dispute the possible presence of such aggrieved actors in our downtowns, and can see Max's analysis holding for them.

However, my experiences in a number of downtown crime/ fear of crime projects during the 1980s and early 1990s showed that important members of the local business community saw crime and the fear of crime as serious problems that were harming the economic and social well-being of their districts. A significant few among them, especially those involved with a lot of real estate, also were quick to see that growing good uses drove out the bad ones, and that well activated downtowns had magnetism. So I would argue that stakeholders who first saw their downtown's crime and fear of crime as problems, not grievances, were more likely to see downtown growth strategies and relationship building downtown security programs such as community policing and downtown ambassadors, as the best ways to reduce the fear of crime. In my experience, the problem solvers were more likely to come up with solution goals framed in a broader analytical context than the aggrievers. The aggrievers, frankly, were more likely to see issues in racial and ethnic terms.

The Importance of a Park's/ Public Space's Location. It strikes me that the ability of a park or public space to provide activity opportunities that visitors would like to engage in is dependent on where they are located and who lives, works and visits the areas within a quarter to half mile of them. Implicit in this viewpoint is that the revitalization potentials of these public spaces can have considerable variation. For example, I convinced leaders in one downtown to target the large number of parents with preschool children who lived in their Greater Downtown area. They consequently built a recommended children's playground, but they placed it on a site at the edge of the downtown that previously was infrequently visited, thinking that the playground would draw the visitors. The playground failed since its magnetism in that location was too weak and few cars and pedestrians passed by it. It would have succeeded if it was in the downtown core, closer to the Starbucks that brought so many of these parents with preschool children to the downtown. Max, how did you decide which activities to put into KMP?

All You Need is 30 Days? I have long admired how savvy public space experts have adopted a trial and error approach towards their offerings, committed to early identification of problems and then implementing quick fixes to them or terminating the uncurable losers. I have managed a couple of BIDs and helped the managers of many others. I have seldom seen their major programs being successfully iterated within 30 days of their creation. Max, did you iterate any programs at KMP within its first 30 days?

Andy Manshel. Urbanist and Author of Learning From Bryant Park

While no one is better than Max Musicant on the details of the process of public space revitalization, the mindset of the urbanist has changed over the last three decades. Public perceptions about the safety of downtowns have become completely different than they were in 1990. The questions are different and the answers are different.

The issue of gentrification looms large over the project of public space improvement. Like New York's mayor, much of the public was born after the renaissance of urban spaces begun in the early 1990's. Younger people (and many lefties) start their analysis of managing public spaces with the assumption that public spaces are safe and have always been perceived to be safe.

In his new book, "City of Fortune," Mason Williams of Willams College argues that to improve perceptions of public spaces is to impose white, middle-class standards on them — and that therefore such improvements foster urban inequality and are a kind of domestic colonialism. Williams throws shade on both Holly Whyte and Jane Jacobs. There are left-wing academics, like Sharon Zukin and Setha Low, who have long held this view.

Also, an obstacle to the improvement of public space is a lack of selfless civic leadership across big cities and a resulting high level of dysfunction among not-for-profit civic organizations. Today's wealthy individuals got that way because they were aggressive at advancing their personal interests and they are used to getting their way. They bring this

perspective to their service on non-profit boards. The Bryant Park restoration was led by individuals like Andrew Heiskell, Fred Papert and Marshall Rose whose agenda, driven by the experience of New York's financial melt-down of the late 1970's, was improving the public sphere. Those individuals have passed and have not been replaced by younger like-minded people. Today's civic leaders want their name on things and are looking for short term results. They are impatient and highly opinionated.

In the early 90's there was a general agreement among civic leaders and public policy professionals that addressing the negative perception of public space was essential to the health of cities and urban economies and needed to be addressed. There were civic leaders in cities across the country who were willing to dedicate their time and resources to attempting to fix the problems. There was also a certain desperation among major property owners about the wiping out of the value of their investments as a result of perceived urban decay. Those owners were willing to try anything to preserve their capital and to take big swings. This is no longer the case.

Those of us who have read Whyte and Jacobs and who understand the social dynamics of downtowns and public spaces must now develop the case for why neighborhood revitalization is essential. We need to take on the issues of displacement (for which there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence and little actual data) and gentrification head on. These "urban legends" need to be debunked. We have to assert firmly that there is no improving the lives of the urban least well off without physical neighborhood improvement — that is, what some call gentrification. Economic and ethnic neighborhood diversity is a good thing. In fact, it may well be that the best way to improve the situation of the least well-off urban citizens is mixed-income housing in diverse neighborhoods. We need the data. What we know leads to bad outcomes is the densification of low-income people in particular neighborhoods, like the Rockaways in Queens. We need more research on this.

It has always been a challenge to persuade civic leaders that the tools of placemaking, which take time and involve small steps rather than grand gestures, are the most effective way to produce positive outcomes in public space improvement. It has now become nearly impossible to persuade them. Again, even more than in the past community leaders want to build things with their name on them. The essential challenge of placemaking has always been that it involves moves that are in no one's particular interest, making it difficult to build elite support for them. Selflessness and humility, the values that Holly Whyte brought to his work, are not abundantly available today in the civic sphere.

We know that the techniques that Max advocates in his excellent series of articles about placemaking work. However, we now, more than ever, need to build a case for the values behind them and why they are important. Mayor Mamdani, for one, who (like my children who are his age) grew up on an economically diverse Upper West Side that was clean and safe, doesn't seem to understand why improving downtown public spaces is important. We need to make a case to him and his cohort about how downtowns drive urban

economies, and why residential neighborhood diversity is a goal to be sought. To fail is to repeat the past.

Jerome Barth. Founder of Town Square.

A Problem Or A Grievance. I am not sure whether it matters if we call the issue a problem or a grievance. It is a problem if you have to deal with it because you are exposed to a bad place that makes you feel unsafe. Getting down my block and dealing with the unfortunate souls who live or beg most of the time under the highway bridge at 17th and Fourth in Brooklyn where I live is a problem. For the folks a few streets up it is only a grievance. But they are there because it is the worst place; it is the place of last resort. This is where Max is right: short of committing or jailing them you won't address the problem. But if the space was active and attractive, they wouldn't be there because this location would no longer be adequate to their needs: begging for cash from passing cars, hoarding all sorts of streets finds and discarded junk, drug dealing, and being collapsed in stupor for a few hours. The way to "solve" the problem is to make the space, maintain it, and to "lead with invitation" as the article states. But this requires a manager. Someone—a person or organization—who feels a sense of responsibility and cares. Someone who "wakes up in the morning thinking about this place." This is the second of Max's points: the consistency of care, and it is right on.

I will also say that despite one's politics, the appreciation people have of a space's likelihood of being safe tends to be pretty universal and accurate. For all the talk of the dominant ideas of our time, city dwellers have a very finely tuned apparatus to determine the exact status and threat range of people and situations. They can be distracted by their phones but typically they notice and react accordingly. You can vote for Mamdani and believe in intersectionality and still cross the sidewalk in NY after 10 pm to avoid a person who could be a threat. This ability to gauge threat is one of the reasons why once a program such as the one Max mentioned is put in place, a quick turnaround is possible, because people will feel they can deal with mildly unsavory issues while enjoying the greater benefits of an interesting and well-programmed place. Certainly this is what we saw at the Jardins Gamelins in Montreal, where the homeless never left or really changed their habits. They adapted to a larger, more diverse crowd that, by and large, ignores them. Everyone gets to enjoy the space. Real criminals likely to commit violence will likely leave: an active space is no longer one where they can do business without being disturbed.

David to your point that people want to solve problems is the right one: I fully agree, one needs to want to improve things. But it is also necessary to have the right mindset: to understand that you must lead with activation and inviting an audience rather than becoming a fortress.

The Importance of a Park's/ Public Space's Location. On our end and to this point we always say: the principles are always the same, their application is always adapted to the local environment. You have to see what is there, what constitutes "the community" and

how they want and can get involved in the space. Every project will have a local flavor. But there are rules that are always true: for example a stage to host local acts should be close to the ground, not 4 feet up or you lose the connection to the public. Or: movable seating (unless you pick terrible furniture) pretty much always works. It works wonders. But my sense is that regardless of where a place is it can always be made better, nor is there a true "lost cause." Some cases are harder than others.

Here I would also pick on one of the things Andy wrote: "It has always been a challenge to persuade civic leaders that the tools of placemaking, which take time and involve small steps rather than grand gestures, are the most effective way to produce positive outcomes in public space improvement. It has now become nearly impossible to persuade them." The main reason for this that I could observe over the last four years of running Town Square/Belleville, is that the agent of change city officials as well as developers will deploy to solve problems is to call the architect, or the landscape architect. They think it is a Design problem. And talk of design is everywhere in our world. And, yes, design plays a part, sure. But it is not a problem of design, it is of uses. Architects, most of the time, are part of the problem, not the solution. They are interested in gestures and materials, more so than in people and uses. But when you have to answer: "Who are you going to call?" The answer is not Max, or Jerome. It is the architects. The RFPs are written that way. The money goes to pavers on the ground rather than to an active program.

*Having an Impact or Changing a District's Trajectory***.** You can have an impact within 30 days. You can't change the trajectory of a district in that time - I would argue that is a 3-10 year endeavor, depending on the starting ambition- but you can make a difference. We opened #carrebywardsquare mid-July in Ottawa this summer. The change on the street was instantaneous. Families appeared. People stayed. But that is the easy part. The harder part is to bring all the actors together to make the right leasing and development decisions to transform short term wins into long term improvements. There are so few good places that as soon as you make one, it has a great chance of attracting people.

Max Musicant. Founder and CEO of The Musicant Group.

Problems vs. Grievances - my point here is that the problems and grievances are both real, but in trying to do something about it, if you organize your efforts around exclusively getting rid of a negative, you can't actually solve the problem. For example, issues of safety are real - but organizing your efforts only around "getting rid of the drug dealers" won't get you there, because you'll only use tools/approaches that are about enforcement and negation. But if you orient your efforts around "a safe place for everyone" you still are addressing the very real issues, but the orientation allows everyone to be part of the success AND opens up more tools/strategies that can actually solve the problem by creating something better.

Location. As Jerome spoke to - the approaches are the same but how they are applied looks different depending on context. Kellogg Mall Park was challenging because it had so few constituents. The one high rise across the street had a small crappy dog pee area and we saw dog walkers around the area already - so that was an obvious move, in addition to dog walkers being more risk tolerant. Beyond that, we had to build a constituency through new activities and events from a very low base.

30 Days. This was a surprisingly fast turnaround and not typical. For example, I am applying a similar approach in one of the two commercial districts most impacted by the George Floyd uprising this summer and our ambassadors are having a big impact, but we have not shifted the % women/kids visitor share to the central public space due to a combination of: a larger district, more drug use problems, more apathetic police, less $ to add new activities and programming, and we are not operating adjacent to a functioning BID, but rather creating a micro BID island.

The Availability of Capital vs Operating Money. The challenge - as Andy lays out, the longer term payoff of much of these efforts is counter to both electoral cycles and capital allocation. Debt/equity are relatively abundant, operating dollars far less so. Further, decades of this have pushed most creativity and creative people into the capital phase leaving only those satisfied with maintaining stasis to the daily care of spaces. Not only do we need to advocate for the values shift, but also rethink and articulate the need for changes to governance, funding, and incentives.

Jerome Barth

It is such an important point: there is always capital money, but no operating money. Which is yet another reason why the PPPs are important, as they create an independent source of ongoing money that evades the universe of the regular public purse.

In that respect I want to point out how NYC EDC did a good job setting up its properties at Pacific Park, which we manage now, with a built- in mechanism for operating funds.

David Milder

Parks and public spaces are not the only downtown entities that often have enough capital funds to be built or renovated, but lack sufficient operating funds to support their needed programming. Many downtown theater renovations and PAC creations in smaller to larger medium sized cities also suffer from this problem. Often, with them, the cause is not so much the lack of external funds to tap into, but their failure to properly consider their venues' future programming until very late in the project, often close to, or even after their opening dates. Pre-opening their attention was mainly focused on raising capital funds, winning the needed political support, and dealing with construction issues. They often

have some vague, unresearched and off target notion of the programs they will run to attract their targeted audiences. One renovated theater, for example, opened expecting to attract touring high culture performers and companies, only to find that their seating was too small to attract them. A few years later, after some serious financial stress and trial and error remedies, comedians were found to be its strongest and most reliable attraction. I wonder how many parks and other public spaces that were not savvy enough to hire firms like Town Center and The Musicant Group have problems similar to those of these indoor formal entertainment venues? My bet is that there are quite a few.