Common Places: Finding a Framework

Common places are woven into our daily life, from a variety of sources. Some are naturally
organized, such as the network of streets and roads that we develop without planning.
Others are created, like the neighborhood
shopping centers and parks. These places are essential
for our quality of life, providing a sense of place and community.

Street Trees as Common Places

In the case of Downtown, Oak Street is undergoing a remarkable revival. A century ago, it was known for its
vigorous street trees, which lined the street and created a sense of place.

Tree Frameworks

Tree frameworks have been essential in the development of Oak Street's identity. These frameworks help structure the street, guiding the placement of buildings and public spaces.

In conclusion, the importance of common places cannot be overstated. They are the backbone of our communities, providing a sense of identity and belonging.

Endnotes

1. For more information on Oak Street, see "The Oak Street Revitalization Plan" by Oak Street Community Association.
3. "The Art of Street Trees" by Jane Jacobs.
ways, and the connection to North Michigan Avenue (two blocks east) via walkways along the Chicago River could be improved. Second, it must connect better, architecturally, to activities in buildings along it; recent projects like the Chicago Theatre renovation and the DePaul Center (which includes retail and educational space) are improving matters. Third, finding new uses for mothballed buildings while conserving their historic qualities is essential for maintaining the memories that have sustained interest in the street.

"State Street brings back a heartbeat and feeling for the city, a whole new concept about what city life should be," Chicago Mayor Richard Daley told the forum. "Now we are applying the same idea to small retail streets throughout the city that also went through decline."

Indeed, other projects are exploring how local streets can be common grounds for the communities they serve. The reconstruction of the Sunnyside pedestrian mall, in Uptown, involved installing new lighting, street furniture and art to make the mall more engaging. But the biggest accomplishment was reconciling the interests of the two communities that shared the space yet distrusted each other, and creating a civic framework that would take care of the mall, according to Monique Barwick, of the city’s cultural affairs agency.

Another project involves 35th Street, a struggling commercial strip that links historically Black Bronzeville and the Illinois Institute of Technology, and will be the site of Chicago’s new police headquarters. A joint IIT—Harvard studio examined how this investment, coupled with the community’s aspiration to be a center for African American culture and tourism, could change the street. The studio staged charettes involving nearly twenty community groups and offered site-specific proposals for shops, jazz clubs, a hotel and small public spaces.

The plan served as "a motivator and inspirer," architecture professor Dirk Denison noted, and is one of several projects exploring how IIT and Bronzeville can forge a common vision for neighborhood revitalization. "Now we need a plan for building community from a capacity point of view," community leader Carroll Lucas said. "How do we build our ability to advance this agenda?"

**Regional Landscape as a Framework**

Chicago’s regional landscape — Lake Michigan, the forests and the prairies — has long been a powerful inspiration and anchor for the city’s common places. "The idea of lakefront park has been deeply implanted in Chicago since the federal government gave the city lakefront land in the 1840s," observed Laurence Oakvett.

Indeed, Grant Park, where the Loop meets Lake Michigan, has been a work in progress since then. Chicago Park District director Edward Uhlir, FASLA, described how it has included...
forward through a series of breakwater and fill projects, deals with railroads and legal battles, not to mention visionary plans. Now the goal is to connect Grant Park north past the Illinois Center to Navy Pier, and south to Burnham Park and Northerly Island. This three-mile chain will link a range of gathering places serving the entire region: Navy Pier’s promenade, beer gardens and exhibition halls; Grant Park’s marina and green; event facilities like Soldier Field and McCormick Place; and institutions like the Art Institute, Field Museum of Natural History, Shedd Aquarium and Adler Planetarium.

The southward connection has been facilitated by the recent relocation of Lakeshore Drive, a high-speed arterial. Burnham Park is likely to change dramatically when the park district closes Meigs Field (an airstrip built on the site of the 1933-34 World’s Fair). The district has proposed creating a “museum campus” with spaces and programming related to natural science themes. Filling in this lakefront framework will require careful compromise, several planners acknowledged. Cultural institutions are growing and becoming more entrepreneurial, straining their historic buildings and settings, aquarium planner Daniel Blease noted. The park district is also programming facilities like Soldier Field more aggressively to keep them from losing money. Access, parking and expansion space are critical; but citizen groups are demanding more green space, and Lakeshore Drive and rail lines inhibit east-west pedestrian and transit connections.

Chicago is also beginning to use its regional landscape as a framework for common places at a local scale. Like many cities, Chicago is rediscovers its riverfront, in large part because improvements to sanitary and stormwater treatment systems have improved water quality. In 1991, the city adopted downtown riverfront design guidelines, requiring projects to set back from the water and provide amenities. Some changes have occurred already, including a waterfont cafe at one new hotel. City planner Joseph Zebnder described six more projects — including cafes, docks, fishing platforms and street-end plazas — that could be built with city funds or through development agreements. Planners are also working on guidelines for the entire 42-mile river, including public access requirements in industrial and shopping areas better connections to the river where it passes through regional forest reserves.

Plans as Frameworks

Chicago offers a powerful example of how a planning vision can serve as a framework for the evolution of common places. Daniel H. Burnham’s 1909 plan is still a fundamental reference point for many projects, even though the city’s physical structure and economic and social composition have changed dramatically since then. Just as important, the city seems imbued with a can-do spirit, which is exemplified by Mayor Daley’s tenacity on making public works projects accountable to the public.

A convincing case of this is the evolution of North Michigan Avenue. In Burnham’s day it was an ordinary street in a tenement zone, but he proposed turning it into a grand boulevard, both to connect the Loop to the north lakefront and to establish property value. “Burnham thought Michigan Avenue would be a great street, and Jules Guerin drew it with trees, commotion, people, bustle,” explained Howard Decker, FAIA; indeed, as State Street declined, it emerged as Chicago’s premier shopping and architectural address.

Despite the persistence of Burnham’s vision, the city clearly needs to establish new planning frameworks. Chicago’s streets, boulevards, lakefront and river serve as powerful elements of urban form and armatures for common places, but the city needs something more. For example, Bronzeville’s Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, part of a boulevard system designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, received a $20.5 million spruce up with new
landscaping and public art. Yet the street is primarily a regional traffic artery, while 13th Street, which crosses the boulevard struggles to emerge as a framework for community life.

Another issue is a lack of useful open space. Two-thirds of Chicagoans live in areas where parks are too crowded or too far away, and the city's open space system has neither kept up with recreation demands nor managed to set aside sufficient habitats for plants and animals. Consequently, Chicago is actively adding to its public open space inventory, thanks in part to $6 billion in funding from a bond issue.

Chicago's CitySpace Project, begun in 1995, includes initiatives to revitalize vacant playgrounds, transform vacant lots into parks and develop riverfront open space. For example, eighty percent of the city's 557 schools have land that is in bad shape or severely underused, according to planner Patricia Gallagher; the project seeks to create 120 new parks at schools. The project also seeks to establish organizational and funding frameworks to ensure new parks can be maintained. The opportunism and local scale inherent in each intervention makes this important plan quite different from Burnham's grand vision, yet it is probably more appropriate for our times.

Common Places: Directions for Investigation
This year's forums concentrated on two broad themes — how common spaces are addressing increasingly complicated agendas, and how they are connected to a city's physical frameworks, social networks and expectations for itself. The forums also raised several issues for further consideration.

The forums focused largely on common places in central cities. What types of common spaces, and what frameworks, are relevant at the metropolitan scale? Even in cases where regional frameworks exist, such as rail systems in the Bay Area or Chicago, or the trails that encircle the bay and ridgelines in the Bay Area, how are the local and regional scales mediated in urban design and architecture?

The forums generally addressed common places that exist within an urban texture, such as downtowns or older, denser neighborhoods. At least two other textures are equally relevant — the campus and the suburb. The forums examined, in all too briefly, how campuses like Levi's corporate headquarters and the Yerba Buena Gardens cultural center were integrated into San Francisco's grid, and Don Miles, FAIA, described the meshing of Los Angeles' Exposition Park with the surrounding city.

The forums tended to focus on places that are traditionally public, such as streets and parks. Yet more and more common places — coffee shops, health clubs, bookstores, shopping malls — are not explicitly public. How can planners and designers knit these all into a diverse landscape of common places? Can common places be linked not only to public institutions but also to civic groups and nonprofit organizations, which are assuming an increasingly important role in civil society?

The shifting roles of common places, and the complex ways in which they are becoming embedded in our communities, pose countless design questions. It may still be true that one must pay for the public life, but the opportunities for cultivating common ground seem richer, more challenging and more laden with potential than one would first imagine.

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