INCLUSIVE BY DESIGN: LAYING A FOUNDATION FOR DIVERSITY IN PUBLIC SPACE

JUL 12, 2019

Katherine Peinhardt and Nate Storring

This article is the third article in our four-part series, A Playbook for Inclusive Placemaking, produced in collaboration with Emily Manz of EMI Strategy. Read the first article on community process here, the second article on programming here, and the fourth article on public space management here.

What does it mean for a public space to be "well-designed"? Is it about how it looks? How it works? How it feels? And for whom?

As we emphasize at Project for Public Spaces, design often wrongly overshadows the other factors that make a public space active and inclusive, and design alone can rarely achieve these goals. But it does provide an important foundation. The look, feel, and function of a public space—its design—determines who can navigate to and within a space, to whom it appeals, and what types of activities can take root there.

While thoughtful programming may attract a diversity of people, bad design can make that programming ineffective or impossible, and make potential users feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. Bad design is something we can all feel in our guts, and whether each of us feel welcome or wary upon entering a public space depends largely on countless little details of aesthetics and function. Sometimes these choices aren't so subtle: Many public spaces include hostile architecture, like spikes along ledges to prevent sitting or handrails

on benches to prevent lying down, in an attempt to put limits on who can use a place and for what. This is intentional exclusion, and design at its very worst.

In the design process, every choice counts when it comes to inclusion in a public space, but that doesn't mean that we can expect every choice to be perfect right away. The best way to avoid these pitfalls of bad design is to invest in a robust community process that includes "Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper" design experiments, and in ongoing public space management to ensure that design and programming both continuously evolve in response to community needs.

Above and beyond simply avoiding exclusion, actively inclusive design in public space lays a foundation for the kind of civic life that build a sense of attachment and belonging for *everyone*. Here are five strategies for designing and re-designing public spaces for all.

Wide, accessible paths make public spaces comfortable for everyone, particularly those with mobility limitations. Photo credit: Katherine Peinhardt

1. DESIGN FOR DIFFERING ABILITIES.

Great places are designed for the inclusion and enjoyment of everyone, including those with differing cognitive, sensory, physical, or developmental abilities. Nearly every feature of a public space can be optimized for maximum accessibility: Tactile strips at crosswalks; accessible restrooms and parking spaces; color contrast applications to poles, bollards and steps; and more.

Beyond simply meeting the accessibility requirements set forth in the Americans with Disabilities Act, the goal should be to make sure that everyone can feel comfortable in a space. By approaching design through the lens of comfort, we recognize that accessibility is a deeply personal and intersectional experience. Choices around elements like lighting, table height, and seating can make sure everyone has a place to sit, meet friends, and take part in the day-to-day activities in a space.

The Imagination Center in Burnside Park made space for well-curated gender-inclusive programming, better reflecting the users of the space.

2. CONSIDER GENDER DYNAMICS.

Public space designers must tune into how people of different gender identities and expressions navigate and use a public space in order to understand the best ways to make all people feel welcomed and safe.

The topic of safety tends to dominate any discussion around gender-inclusive spaces. While features like clear entrance and exit paths, visible wayfinding, and unobstructed lines of sight into a public space can make everyone feel more at ease in a park or plaza, this is not the whole picture.

To make a place for people of all gender expressions and sexual identities, the key is making a space feel not only open, but also *exciting*. To start, ensuring that there is adequate space for inclusive programming is key. In Burnside Park in Providence, Rhode Island, Project for Public Spaces worked with local partners to implement new design elements like a stage, a storage shed, and an outdoor reading room, which allowed new family friendly programming to take place and in turn attracted a higher proportion of women and children to the park.

However, it's important to remember that gender is fluid, and dovetails in complex ways with sexual identity. Accordingly, the UK-based advocacy organization Planning Out recently released an LGBT+ Place-Making Toolkit. While primarily focused on city planning practices in London, it provides lessons for other placemakers about how design, development, and regulation can intentionally or unintentionally exclude or support the LGBT+ community.

Water features were just one of the amenities in Leitchcroft Park in Toronto, ON, Canada that the nearby South Asian community felt would make the park more attractive and responsive to their needs. Credit: Wendy Gold, OpenCity Projects.

3. PROVIDE AMENITIES FOR CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

In public spaces, one size most certainly does not fit all. It is all too common for public space designers to aim either to replicate other "iconic" parks or to create low-maintenance, low-imagination facilities that result in "aggressive blandness." Neither paths provide a genuine reflection of a community. To avoid these copy-paste design choices, designers have to put in the legwork to continue the outreach process, tapping into the values and uses of different groups over time.

When municipal employees and urban designers working on Toronto's Leitchcroft Park took a closer look into the public space vision of locals, it was clear that South Asian community members were dissatisfied with the space. Locals wanted benches to be replaced with "social," movable seating, and hoped for more shaded areas and water features. To be nimble in design choices, and to maintain a mindset of deep listening, is to ensure that a space is always a place of genuine cultural exchange.

> *"..all too often, the custodians of public spaces — and especially municipal parks and recreation departments — have opted for the lowest common denominator when making design and landscaping choices: grass, a few sports courts, some benches and picnic tables, and maybe a piece of public art or a flower bed." —John Lorinc*

Photo credit: Paper Monuments.

4. RECOGNIZE PUBLIC SPACES AS STORYTELLERS.

The design of public space always tells a story, whether the designer recognizes it or not. Choices like the aesthetics of branding, wayfinding, memorials, and signage—not to mention their actual content—send a cumulative message that may be interpreted differently by every would-be user and user group.

Rather than allowing that message to be haphazard, or opting for the merely inoffensive, some placemakers are finding ways to tell stories that are proactively inclusive. For example, progressive public history organization Paper Monuments specializes in participatory, temporary public space displays that detail the (often difficult) histories of a

city or a park—a powerful but "Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper" effort to dive deeper into the story of a community through the lens of public space. Similarly, Monument Lab examines the complex and problematic patterns of erasure in public space storytelling. Working toward "commemorative justice," public spaces can "use people-powered tactical urbanism to address the negative effects of toxic narrative exclusion and racist public art." During the design process, ensuring that displays, like plaques, statues, and signs, recognize local history can ensure that members of the community feel seen and acknowledged.

Portland Mercado in Portland, OR takes advantage of the city's well-known food truck culture to support Latinx entrepreneurship through low-cost retail space and business services. Photo credit: Nate Storring.

5. MAKE A LITTLE ROOM FOR RETAIL.

Public spaces that provide opportunities for underrepresented vendors can attract a broader audience, and play a part in redistributing economic opportunities to people who may not otherwise have access to a physical location to sell their products or services. Places like Union Market in Mankato, Minnesota provide small-scale spaces (some as

small as 100 square feet), providing owners of small or fledgling businesses a chance to build up their customer base with less risk and financial burden than opening a full storefront elsewhere. However, retail <u>must never be the sole purpose of the space</u>—a balanced combination of retail and non-retail uses can ensure that the space never crowds out users who simply want to use the space without being a customer.

It is important to remember that the design of a place can evoke strong feelings, from aversion to attachment. A key purpose of a public space is to create room for people to take part in civic, physical, and social activity, and every design decision should consider how to extend that function to as many members of the community as possible.