

# ESTABLISHING A "SENSE OF PLACE"



## DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

When Fred Kent created and ran the *Project for Public Spaces*, he inspired me with the placemaking concept, and I became very interested in learning. He was somehow ousted later, and the group of 400 people he put together internationally collapsed under new management.

I always remember what he said about how you can only hold someone's interest for about 100 feet when they are walking in a downtown setting. Figure twenty-five feet per storefront would be like four storefronts in terms of distance.

One hundred feet of what I would term "blank space" would be a parking lot separating the stores. It relates to a psychological barrier to walking those 100 feet to see what is on the other side — keeping one's attention and interest while proceeding down the sidewalk.

I agree with his analysis in theory, assuming that there is something at the end of the hundred feet that you would want someone to see. My work is usually to take a place and make it better. The transition from block to block is different in many ways. Some towns only have one viable block. That was the case in Phoenixville when the two-hundred block was the destination, and Iron Hill and Phoenix Village were vacant lots.

On South Street in Philadelphia (Front to Eleventh), there were maybe eight viable blocks, with both sides of the street being viable with back-to-back businesses on contiguous blocks. The problem was not volume but more atmosphere.

Kensington Avenue (Front to Lehigh) had many closed storefronts, and our primary

purpose, at the time, was to keep Fidelity Bank from closing the Huntington Avenue intersection bank as it was the anchor to draw traffic.

An Anchor Building is essential when determining how the traffic moves downtown and, in a way, negates the 100 feet theory, depending upon the parking location. But spacing is just a side item when it comes to place.

What you do in a place defines the place to a great extent. You can create a performance and event venue in a space that could be an anchor or just something to continue one hundred feet of your street line. What is more important is what you do on a typical day downtown and how people interact with the space. That is why when I hear people talking professionally about place-making, they think of events and promotions. I don't disagree with them but keep quiet.

One of the things that I had in common on all the streets was ladies of the evening during daylight hours. I am not condemning but looking at that activity as a factor in determining the desirability of a space. How people handle garbage collection or whether the dwellings above the storefront are occupied are essential considerations.

When you are looking at making changes to improve the positioning of the downtown, how important is the population utilizing the space and the legality and practicality of what they are doing? This has nothing to do with some commercial districts' unhoused population issues. I am talking about the everyday users of the town.

The new South Street Headhouse district director recently tried to ban garbage cans downtown. I read it was the red cans, and I wonder if they are supplemental or the only cans down there now. As I think back, I did the same thing in Phoenixville; I pulled all the trash cans and benches and created a stir.

*(Continued on page 48)*



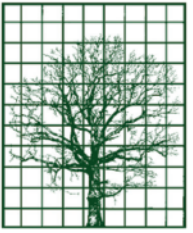
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*(Continued from page 47)*

On South Street, I followed the garbage trucks and confronted merchants concerning their dumping in the street cans.

This action is one of desperation to solve an issue when no one wants to listen. You want the place clean. You don't wish for litter everywhere; you want people to respect the space. People are transient. The space is the space and will always be at that latitude and longitude no matter what. Some places do not have advantageous geographical positioning as compared to others.

The buildings' look and quality present the atmosphere that, to a great extent, defines the space. When you compare my Kensington district with my South Street district, there is a similar setup with buildings. For the most part, intact and in a row, the buildings are somewhat identical. It is the past reputation that is different, and it makes South Street more successful than Kensington Avenue.

Is place-making really about the place, or is it more about the reputation of the place? Is some dude sitting on the back of the bench the same as some older man sitting on the seat of a bench? Is the cost of a sexual favor by the sex workers an indication of the area? Both Phoenixville and Kensington Avenue had very low-level sex workers where the price varied from twenty-five

cents to a couple of dollars. In one town, I made it difficult to partake in the other; I just tried to stop some public sex acts during school crossing times.

What made the difference? It was the volume of activity and the customary nature of the activity that determined how the space was used. The space viability is dependent on location, reputation, and accepted use for the space. Not all space is cookie-cutter; not all space is child-friendly or handicapped-accessible. People who hang out on the corner are not wrong just because they hang out there. Not all young people seek to provide trouble when they gather, and they may not look like they want to encourage you to cross that hundred-foot spacing if they are on the other side of that one hundred feet.

Placemaking is more about how a place is perceived versus what happens. Things change, and gathering places change depending on population mobility and migration. People need to understand the current uses may be decades or centuries in the making. The idea is to make it better for the space and the people there, not to drive those people to another location.

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