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PUBLIC PLACES/SPACES

Description:

Outdoor public places/spaces include streets, streetscapes, parks, trails, plazas, squares, community greens, community gardens, downtown sidewalks, recreational areas, and other places—where people meet intentionally or by chance. Such public spaces (termed the public realm) play an important social role in a community, and sociologists refer to the public realm as the “third place” for residents, with home being the first place and the workplace being the second.

Public space is a core—but often forgotten—element of a community's quality-of-life for *all* residents, including older adults and individuals with disabilities. Professional planner, Leslie Kettren, noted: “The public space is the glue that holds neighborhoods and society together . . . it is the neighborhood park or plaza where we form many of our most important associations and networks and make new friends.”¹ Urban social historian, William H. Whyte, put it this way: “What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people.”²

Prior to World War II, public spaces/places were built into traditional cities and villages, but most development that has occurred since then (designed around the convenience of automobile use) has incorporated more generous allotments of private space in larger suburban houses and lots, without the same focus on public places. Across the country, an increasing appreciation of the role of public places in a community's quality of life has accompanied the increasing focus on creating livable communities; and this renewed appreciation is accompanying the trend in planning and architecture toward traditional neighborhood design, such as mixed-use zoning and pedestrian, bike, and transit-oriented development.

References:

¹ Leslie Kettren (2006), *Talking the Walk, Building Walkable Communities*, p. 111. Chicago, IL: The Congress for the New Urbanism.

² William H. Whyte, iWise Video: *Wisdom on Demand*.
http://www.iwise.com/William_H_Whyte.

Benefits:

For all residents, including older adults and individuals with disabilities:

- Public spaces offer opportunities for exercise, social interaction, relaxation, and recreation, which are important for all residents, including older adults and people with disabilities. A 2003 National Association of Home Builders survey found that a top amenity for older adults in deciding where to live is “access to walking or jogging trails.”³ By zoning for public spaces within or near residential neighborhoods, all residents can more readily access public gathering spaces and other members of the community.

For the community:

- Nearby, accessible public spaces within a community provide opportunities for community members to socialize, interact, communicate, and people-watch, which—
 - Improves a "sense of community" and builds a community identity, and
 - Improves community members' physical and mental health by countering social isolation and depression among those residents who may be home-bound or mobility-impaired, or who lack social or family networks, or who are financially unable to afford fitness programs or driving long distances, or whose family and work responsibilities preclude other sources of socialization. This community "added value" benefits including older adults, children and adults with physical or social disabilities, young mothers, workers, teenagers, and others.

Reference:

³ Patricia E. Salkin (September/October, 2007), "Where Will the Baby Boomers Go? Planning and Zoning for an Aging Population," *Talk of the Towns*, magazine of the Association of Towns of the State of New York, Albany, NY.

Impediments or barriers to development or implementation:

- Large-lot zoning provides ample private space to individual landowners, but typically leaves little or no space for public space and public amenities.
- Unmaintained and underutilized public spaces can appear blighted and could possibly attract crime, requiring that maintenance of public spaces be a public priority.

Resource—examples and ordinances:

- Project for Public Spaces, New York, NY: <http://www.pps.org>
 - *Placemaking for Communities*: <http://www.pps.org/about/approach/>.

Resource—written and web:

- Project for Public Spaces, New York, NY: <http://www.pps.org>.
 - K. Madden, A. Wiley-Schwartz, and A. Antoshak (2000; 6th printing: 2010), *How to Turn a Place Around: A Handbook for Creating Successful Public Spaces*. New York, NY: Project for Public Spaces. A handbook providing ideas, diagrams, principles, tools, examples, and performance-evaluation methods—intended to help people understand why some public spaces function and others fail, and to help people evaluate any type of public space, from a neighborhood playground to a major tourist attraction. To purchase (\$30): <http://www.pps.org/store/books/how-to-turn-a-place-around/> Also: <http://www.amazon.com/Place-Around-Project-Public-Spaces/dp/0970632401>
 - *Achieving Great Federal Public Spaces: A Property Manger's Guide*. Washington, DC: U. S. General Services Administration, Public Buildings Service, Office of the Chief Architect, Center for Federal Buildings and Modernizations; and New York, NY: Project for Public Places. A hands-on

resource guide developed by the U. S. General Services Administration and Project for Public Spaces, which provides property managers with tools, ideas, exercises, and resources to evaluate and improve the public spaces in and around federal facilities. http://www.pps.org/pdf/pmg_part1_intro.pdf.

- Leslie Kettren (2006), *Talking the Walk: Building Walkable Communities*. Chicago, IL: The Congress for the New Urbanism.
<http://www.cnu.org/sites/www.cnu.org/files/KettrenTalkingtheWalk.pdf>.
- National Home Builders Association (NAHB) and the MetLife Mature Market Institute (September, 2009), *55+ Housing: Builders, Buyers, and Beyond: What are Builders Building? What Do Buyers Want?* National survey:
http://www.nahb.org/fileUpload_details.aspx?contentTypeID=3&contentID=150582&subContentID=319417.
 - *NAHB 55+ Housing Market Index*—measuring activity in the growing 55+ housing market: http://www.nahb.org/reference_list.aspx?sectionID=1843.
- Alexander Garvin and Gayle Berens (1998), *Urban Parks and Open Space*. Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute and The Trust for Public Land.
- Cy Paumier (2004), *Creating a Vibrant City Center: Urban Design and Regeneration Principles*. Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute.
- Cynthia Girling and Kenneth Helphand (1994), *Yard-Street-Park: The Design of Suburban Open Space*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.
- William H. Whyte (2001), *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. New York, NY: Project for Public Spaces, Inc.