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Project for Public Spaces:

Could a Change in Message Facilitate Better Public Space Planning?

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Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is, on the one hand, a respected non-profit group advocating for public space design and on the other, a group with a conflicting message amongst their working peers, the design professionals. PPS has a distinct message integrated into their presentations, literature and method that design professionals are not working for a community's needs. However, this criticism seems to be referring to designers of a different era, as most if not all present day designers embrace some degree of community participation. The case study of Bryant Park shows that if PPS realizes that both PPS and their partner design firms have similar goals, the resulting public spaces will show greater cohesion and a thorough and integrated design process.

By anyone's standards, Detroit, Michigan, is not a hotbed of investment. Over the past fifty years, the city's problems have been well documented. The population is declining, jobs are leaving for foreign countries, crime and drug use is on the rise, and a once vibrant and exciting downtown is increasingly left to wallow in vacancy or be converted to surface parking lots. But Detroit is not entirely downtrodden; there are still several successful projects underway in Detroit, including the recently completed Campus Martius Park.

Campus Martius has brought praise from both the public and media alike as the new public park of Downtown Detroit. Situated at the "Point of Origin," where Detroit's coordinate street grid begins, the park has become the heart of downtown by creating an active space in which to gather informally and hold festivals and other events on a regular basis. Campus Martius also has encouraged private investment through building infill in and around the park. For a struggling Rust Belt city, these are significant gestures.

These improvements took many years of planning and vision by both the city and hired consultants. One of those consultants was the highly recognized non-profit, Project for Public Spaces(PPS). They have touted Campus Martius Park as an all-around success story, naming it one of their "Greatest Hits" (Project for Public

Spaces 2005). No one can argue with their assessment of this small civic park. It boasts a multitude of activity day and night, summer or winter—from concerts to public ice skating—and features an open lawn, plenty of seating, a café and fountains which have helped to bring people and energy back downtown. Simply put, it has given the residents of metro Detroit a great public space to enjoy and call their own.

In 1999, the city and its taskforce, the Detroit 300 Conservancy, brought in PPS to help guide the community in creating Campus Martius, what then Mayor Dennis W. Archer hoped would be "the best public space in the world" (Project for Public Spaces n.d.). PPS met with city officials and key stakeholders in order to develop a program they hoped would invigorate the site with activity and life. The result of this year-long process was the development of ideas for how the park might function, as well as a schematic plan with suggestions for park design. However, PPS' involvement ended there, and the landscape architecture firm Rundell Ernstberger Associates (REA) were selected from a pool of six national firms to design the new park space (Conservancy n.d.). REA continued to meet with stakeholders and other consultants to create a design tailored to fit the context, space, and community surrounding the park (Rundell 2008), including orienting elements in a safe, logical, and meaningful way;

planning for automobile and pedestrian movement; and managing construction details and the approval process. Unfortunately, a comparison between the finished Campus Martius and a conceptual sketch provided on the PPS website reveals little cohesion between the park and the plan outside of some program elements and the general shape of the site, exposing the lack of communication between PPS and REA throughout the process.

In spite of PPS' involvement with successful public projects around the country and the world, a conflicting message can be seen in their publications, press clippings, and presentations about their relationship with the design world—one that can confuse the public and irritate design professionals. Fred Kent, founder and President of PPS, is the public face of the group and has been a vocal leader in furthering the group's mission



Campus Martius, Detroit, Michigan. Photo: Spencer Olinek

of building communities through involvement with the design process. However, he was recently quoted as saying, “I could tell you all kinds of design flaws with Campus Martius. It might be a little bit overdesigned” (McIntyre 2007). PPS cites Campus Martius as a marquee example of their work while at the same time criticizing its design. Perhaps PPS believed that the finished product did not take into account the ideas of the community or that the designer’s heavy hand was too obvious, but the criticism was neither constructive nor consistent. PPS also lists projects on its website as both members of their “Greatest Hits” as well as the “Hall of Shame,” another example of PPS’ hypocrisy (Project for Public Spaces 2005; Project for Public Spaces n.d.).

As site programmer and community activist, PPS takes part very early on in the process but allows architects, landscape architects, and urban designers to come in and flesh out the design details. As a result, PPS tends to be critical of the later aspects of the projects they work on, especially Kent, who often denigrates the design professions in general. As attacks go, Kent’s statement may be one of the milder against design professionals. He is often quoted in trade publications, newspapers, and public presentations as saying that the designers of public spaces have not done their part in assuring that great places are available in communities (Kemper 2007; Gottlieb 1993; Kent 2007). These rhetorical attacks, subtle or not, continue to unnecessarily strain the relationship between the two groups of public space advocates.

The historical context of PPS’ rise to its popular and influential status in public planning in America may help explain their point of view. The group was formed in 1975 by Fred Kent, who had spent a number of years working with famed urban sociologist William H. Whyte. The two had worked on Whyte’s Street Life Project, which culminated in the 1980 book, “The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces.” The work of Whyte, and subsequently Kent, focused on many lifeless plazas in New York City which were built as a way to gain density bonuses from the city (Whyte 1988). This was also a time when urban renewal and suburbanization were focused on creating private or individual spaces as opposed to improving the public realm. Kent blames the design and engineering fields for creating “objects” instead of “places” during this period of development (Project for Public Spaces 2000).

Kent was dissatisfied with many of the plazas he and Whyte studied during that time—examples of

public spaces that he found did not cater well to those who inhabited the space. These corporate plazas were often uncomfortable with few places to sit and little shade, and were not conducive to human interaction. However, as Kent perhaps fails to recognize or admit, this is no longer the way contemporary design practitioners lay out public space. In fact, they often function in similar ways as PPS, working with the community to inform a design that creates spaces in which people enjoy interacting. The unforgiving and perhaps historically biased criticisms by Kent, and by extension his organization, hurt the goal of building great public spaces by alienating those professionals that eventually take up a project where PPS leaves off.

This negative rhetoric also undercuts PPS’ own agenda. When PPS began, its focus was to make the community a part of the design process, and it likes to be perceived as a partner to the community, either as a hired consultant or only for a presentation. This is essential because PPS’ public perception as a team member supports its credibility as an organization that uses a community-based planning approach, as opposed to a conventional planning approach involving only the design professionals.

PPS develops its public identity in two different ways. First, the organization crafts a simple and clear, jargon-free message about its programs. Second, its literature and public presentations subtly stress the fact that PPS

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is unique from typical development professionals, such as architects or city officials. This message of separation often emphasizes that PPS is working with the community, while others involved are not and may even have their own agenda which is contrary to the best interests of the public.

To reiterate a prior distinction, PPS emphasizes being a placemaker and not a designer. This need for separation is not unique to PPS and the designers of Campus Martius. In the remainder of this paper, I will use the case study of Bryant Park—another highly successful project—to further illustrate this schism.

Case Study

Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan is arguably one of the most successful redeveloped public spaces in the nation. It has a prime location one block east of Broadway, along 42nd street and adjacent to the New York Public Library. Bryant Park acts as a backyard to the Library and an opportunity of respite for the office workers and tourists in its vicinity. In the 1980s, PPS and Whyte collaborated to try to understand how the park—



Bryant Park, New York, N.Y. Photo: Daren Crabill

then in disrepair, overrun by drug dealers, and underutilized by the public—could be reinvigorated.

The recorded history of Bryant Park precedes the Civil War, its early uses ranging from a potter's field to an Army encampment, eventually gaining designation as a public park in 1846 (Thompson 1997). It also has a long history of poor maintenance and misuse dating back to the early 1920s. In the 1940s, a redesign of Bryant Park under the direction of Robert Moses only added to the slow demise of the space, and illegal activities continued to thrive. In the 1970s, despite the drug trade taking over its spaces and a number of murders, the park was designated a New York City Landmark (Thompson 1997).

However, in 1979 opportunities for transformation arose. The Library embarked on a major renovation and suggested that the park be revitalized as well. The Rockefeller Brothers Fund, located in the neighborhood, was tapped by the Library to oversee the rehabilitation and it, in turn, looked to Whyte and his analysis for a starting point. The recommendations were simple: open the park for better circulation and vision, restore restrooms and the fountain, and provide various commercial activities such as a food kiosk. The Fund and the Library formed the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation (BPRC) and invited the landscape architectural firm Hanna/Olin, which was working on a redesign of the Library front terrace, to

undertake Bryant Park as well (Olin 2007; Thompson 1997). After more than ten years of design development, public meetings, fundraising, and construction, the park renovation was complete and Bryant Park was soon one of the most beloved public spaces in New York City.

In order to understand the success of Bryant Park, it is important to trace the development of the Park planning and execution of the plan. Whyte and Kent, through careful analysis, developed a well-intended and by some accounts “brilliant” program which gave the architect—Hugh Hardy—and landscape architects—Hanna/Olin—a jumping off point (Olin 2007). The designers then took the program and gave it shape, and after many different revisions developed a plan that reacted to the program laid out by Whyte and PPS in a meaningful and successful way. Many would agree that the “design” created a “place.” In this instance, roles were well matched to strengths. Whyte and Kent provided analysis while Hanna/Olin and Hardy designed. In addition, all of the stakeholders fought for more than a decade to create what is now a jewel of midtown Manhattan. The review process was lengthy and constantly in the public eye, as is well chronicled in a series of New York Times articles (Harrison 1983; Dunlap 1987; Goldberg 1983).

PPS has, by many accounts, been seen as an important voice in the community of public space planning for more than thirty years. But despite a potentially positive increase in press coverage and the number of engagements, the message offered by PPS has removed it from the core of where it started—as an analysis and programming group advocating for great public spaces. What seems to be a subtle “divide and conquer” scheme to gain the firm favor with the community actually leaves PPS open to scrutiny from the design profession, and causes uncertainty about where it stands in the overall process. PPS’ criticism of projects they have deemed successful in other rhetoric—and may have even worked on—is also confusing for the public.

As a result, design professionals working with PPS may be less likely to collaborate due to the reputation that PPS is gaining for its infamous comments and views. Cooperation and slight shifts in message would likely go a long way in mitigating, at the very least, the schism between the two groups. The benefit would be a more successful public planning process, and hopefully better projects for all of the stakeholders involved. If the development of great public spaces is really the core of PPS’ philosophy, then self-reflection and investigation of the current situation should reveal the flaws in the current paradigm.

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Christian Science Church Park, Boston, Massachusetts Photo: Scott Curry