What makes a good park?

I've written before that cities are not statistics. In that particular case, I was talking about how we can quantify various aspects of a city or neighborhood, but that those numbers tell us very little about life - the actual experience on the ground, whether people will walk and what kind of economic success it might have. While it frustrates the rational mind, it's better to start with looking at human behavior, psychology and even sociology. For example, the notion of Walk Appeal. Our collective fascination with numerical analysis extends to park design as well. Standards-making bodies tell us how much park space a city should have, in what configurations, and with what amenities. It's as if we could simply follow these rules and have successful, well-used parks and public spaces.

Of course, the real world provides no such comfort. Our public spaces vary tremendously in their success – how well they are used, how much they impact adjoining property value, and how much they contribute to people walking or biking.

Parks or plazas of similar sizes show wildly different amounts of usage and success. City officials and residents are often left wondering, why does one park work well when another does not?

Of course, design of the park itself matters. No one has written better about this than William H Whyte, who is discussed in this excellent blog post regarding Brewer Fountain Plaza in Boston. Whyte, like any good researcher, actually studied how people use space, instead of solely relying on design theory. One could say that he excelled at studying humans in their native habitat.

And while Whyte is spot on with those specific criteria for the park/public space, there are a few other bigger-picture criteria from urban design that impact success. For this particular post, I'll use Savannah, GA as a case study, with its famous Oglethorpe-designed master plan. The primary object of my analysis is Forsyth Park, the largest park in the historic district – not one of the 22 squares that the city is most known for.

For a couple of years now, I've not only used Forsyth on a nearly daily basis, but observed how others use it, and how it functions in the community. The park is arguably one of the five or ten best urban parks in America, in my opinion, and a guiding example of how to do it right. While the park certainly nails Whyte's criteria (water, food, trees, triangulation and much more), it's how it fits into the larger picture that interests me most. For example:

Aerial photograph showing how Forsyth Park lies on the Bull Street axis that is the spine of the Historic District

Location, location, location. So many parks, even ones that have great facilities, are on "leftover" land that was too hard to develop or wasn't' in a prime location in the community. In Savannah, Forsyth Park and the squares were integrally-located as part of the neighborhoods, or Wards in this case, as the city developed. So many cities took the opposite approach, as I'll detail

in subsequent posts. This particular land was not an afterthought – it was consciously designed as part of the necessities of living in a city.

Location along key pathways. Again, Forsyth Park is instructive. Located along the axis of Bull Street, Forsyth is on a key spine of the city, extending from City Hall south. The walkway through the middle is a straight shot into the heart of downtown. It's logical and easy. Residents or visitors can walk from one end to the other without having to worry about sense of direction. Because of its location along this key spine, it encourages casual walking or biking, since the beauty of the park enhances the walking experience.
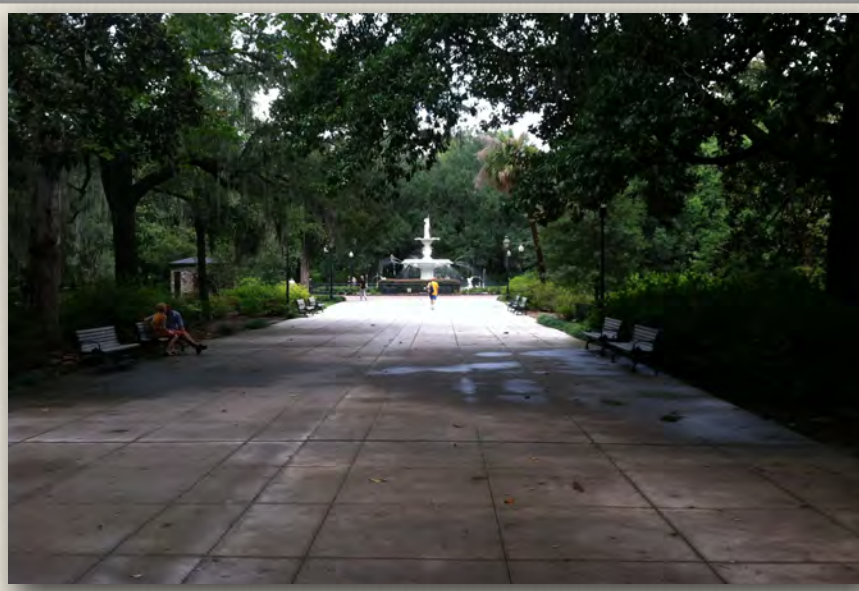
View along the Bull Street axis
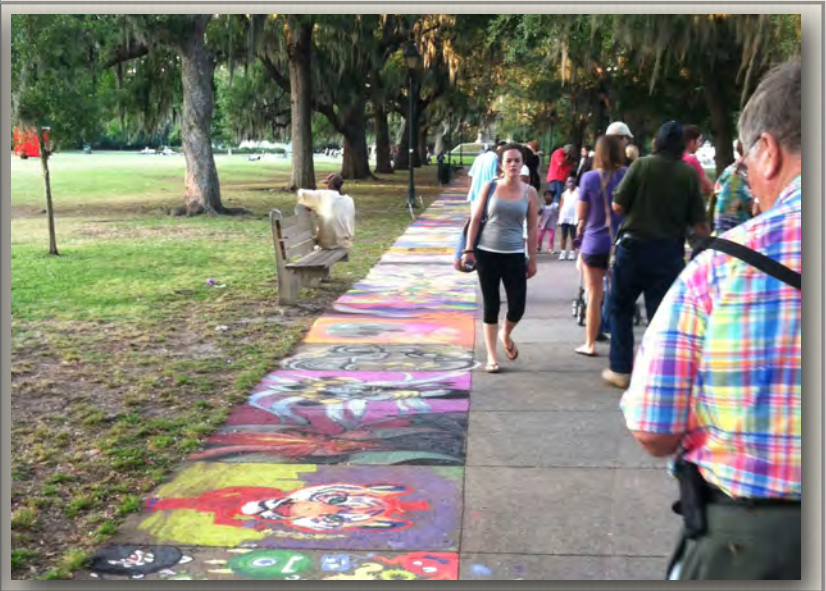
Another view along the Bull Street axis, showing how the location of this pathway as a key element of the whole city encourages special events and more variety of activity.

South side of the park, showing adjacent businesses

Drayton Street has traffic that's too fast due to the one-way configuration, but the actual width of pavement makes it easy to cross from the adjacent homes and businesses.

Integration with the surrounding streets and buildings. While Forsyth is bounded by two streets on the east and west that are one-way, and have traffic that generally moves far too fast, the streets themselves are not wide. This makes them easy to cross for pedestrians, in spite of the high traffic speeds. And, around the park are located small businesses, hotels, bed and breakfasts in addition to the many residences. The park does not feel as though it's set apart from the neighborhood – it feels as though it's distinctly **part** of the neighborhood.

Public space, what we call the "public realm" in planning wonk-speak, is **the** key element in whether or not people actually walk. The streets, plazas, parks, squares and other public spaces must be thoughtfully designed. Public spaces should be well-located as well, or they simply will not be well used. Forsyth Park has all the elements Whyte described eloquently, including a vast amount of simple, open land that can be programmed by its users on a daily basis. These things are not easily quantified, but are certainly observable through the study of human behavior. As we consider retrofitting public spaces or building new ones, we are best served by keeping our desire for quantification in check, and looking harder at how design and behavior intersect, whether that's the scale of a simple playground or an entire neighborhood.

In the next post, I'll examine Kansas City's famous parks system designed by George Kessler, and how those parks rate via this criteria.
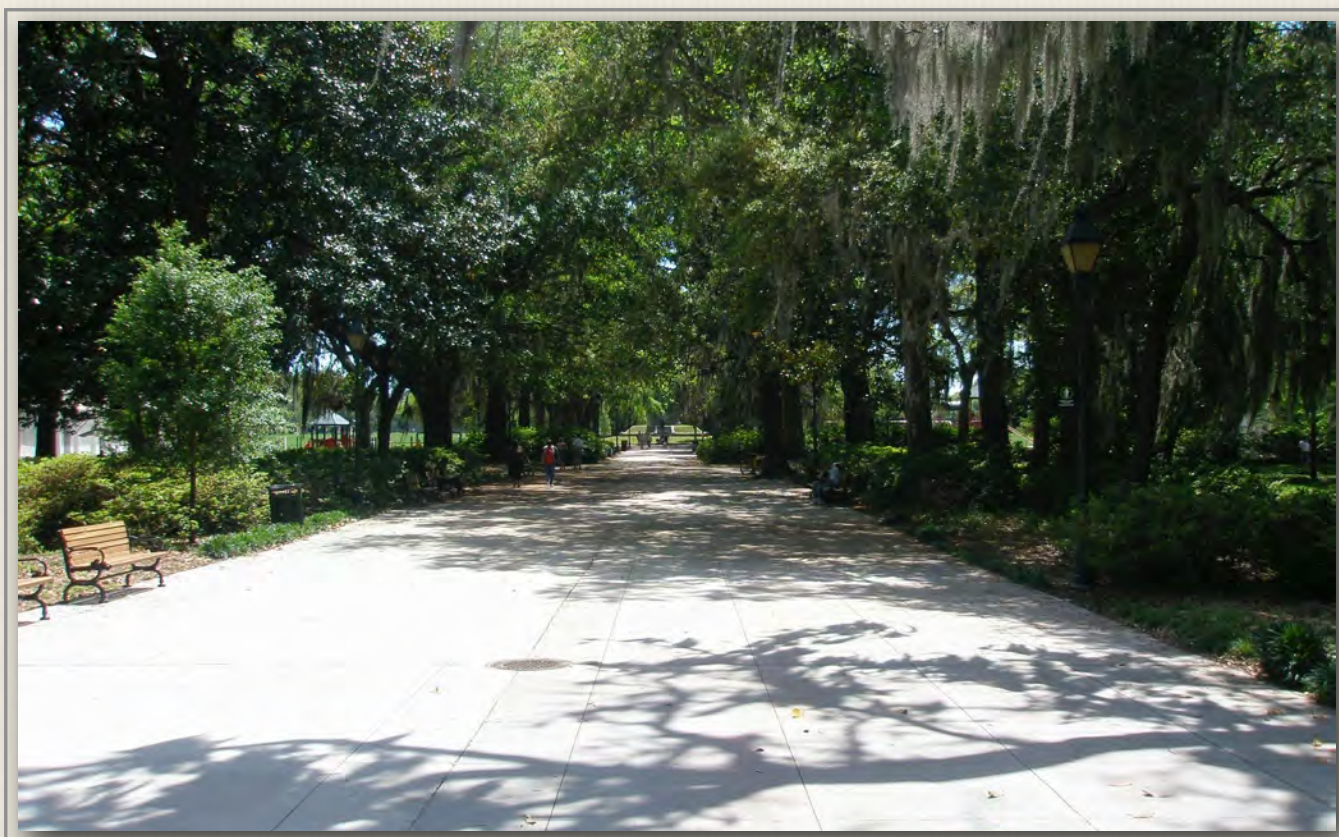
Not so City Beautiful?

In Part One of this series on park design, I wrote about how well-planned parks fit into a city and a series of neighborhoods, such that they not only present the beauty of nature (albeit designed nature), but also useful active and passive recreational space. And, that their location & integration are keys to their success as much as their own design features.

Today I'll examine a park system that I'm intimately familiar with, and which has often been used as a hallmark example of quality park design – the parks and boulevards system in Kansas City, MO.

Designed by George Kessler in the late 19th/ early 20th century, the parks & boulevards system is one of the most extensive in the US, and is an example of the City Beautiful approach to design. For background on the plan, look here and here. The Wilson book in particular is an excellent account of the plan, and what had to be done to get it implemented.

For the purposes of this piece, I'd like to look at how this famous system holds up to the criteria established earlier.
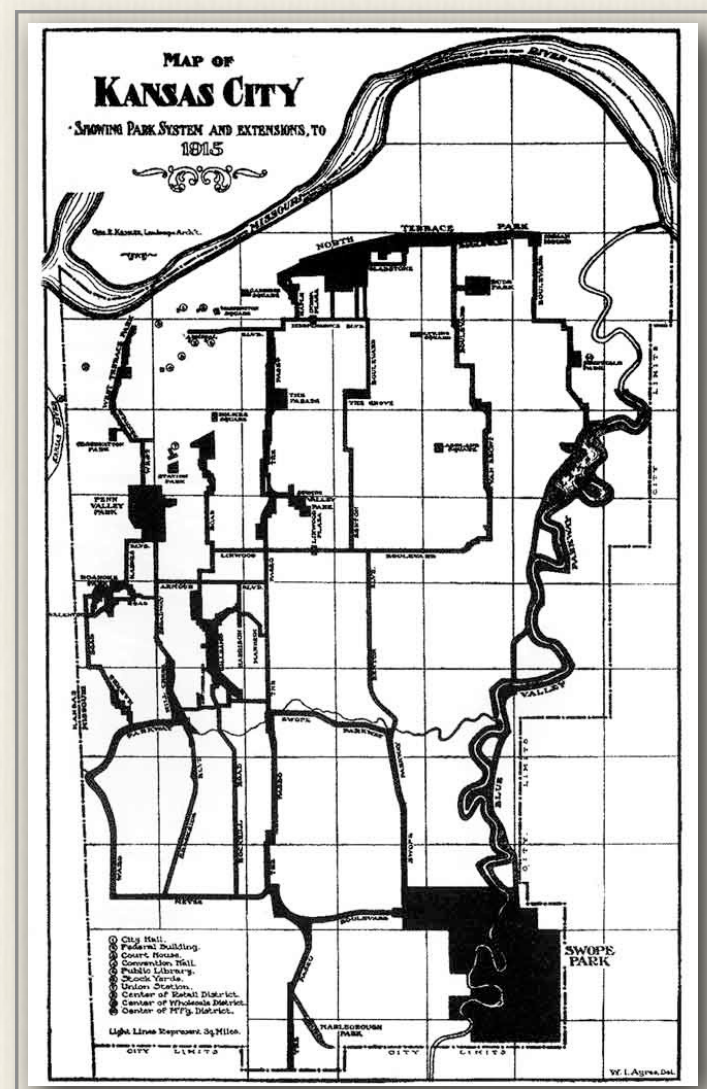
1915 Plan for the KC System

For those unfamiliar, Kansas City is not a flat city – it's composed of gently rolling hills, a few fairly steep bluffs, and a lot of minor streams and creeks, at least historically. The Kessler plan worked with the natural features, and aligned parkways and boulevards along the waterways and ridges. It purposefully cut across the city's fairly uniform grid of streets, re-platting entire neighborhoods in the process. Interestingly, this was a precursor for what was to come in later decades with the interstate highway system.


Typical view showing the rural approach to design

In Kessler's case, the desire was to create a series of attractive parks and boulevards, to "civilize" the city and provide for the beauty of nature in the urban environment. This all sounds very laudable, especially in the context of the late 19th century city, which was often dirty and crowded, with little public space for residents. And, for the most part, the system accomplishes those goals very well – it is attractive and green, especially when riding along in a car. It makes driving through the city a much more beautiful experience than driving through parts of the city without it. And, with some thoughtful changes, the system could accommodate bicycles very well, too. It would take de-prioritizing fast auto traffic, but it would not be a terribly difficult change.

Within those observations, though, lie the problems of the system – it is designed primarily for the aesthetics of driving than for the usefulness of pedestrians or neighborhoods. In fact, the roadways often form strong edges of neighborhoods, as their width and corresponding high-speed traffic makes them hazardous to cross. As a system of parks that people actually use on a daily basis, or that encourages people to actively walk around, the system largely doesn't work. In fact, it's easy to cynically look at the system and say that the land given over to parkways and parks is mostly undesirable land from a development standpoint.

And, that this was on purpose – it was the great compromise to get a system built, without seeming to take prime land from builders, developers and property owners as the city developed.

As an example of the good and bad of the plan, we can look at Roanoke Park. At over 37 acres (nearly twice the size of Forsyth Park in Savannah, and half the size of Loose Park in KC) the park is a significant part of the system. It sits amidst three Midtown neighborhoods in need of park space, since they otherwise have none.
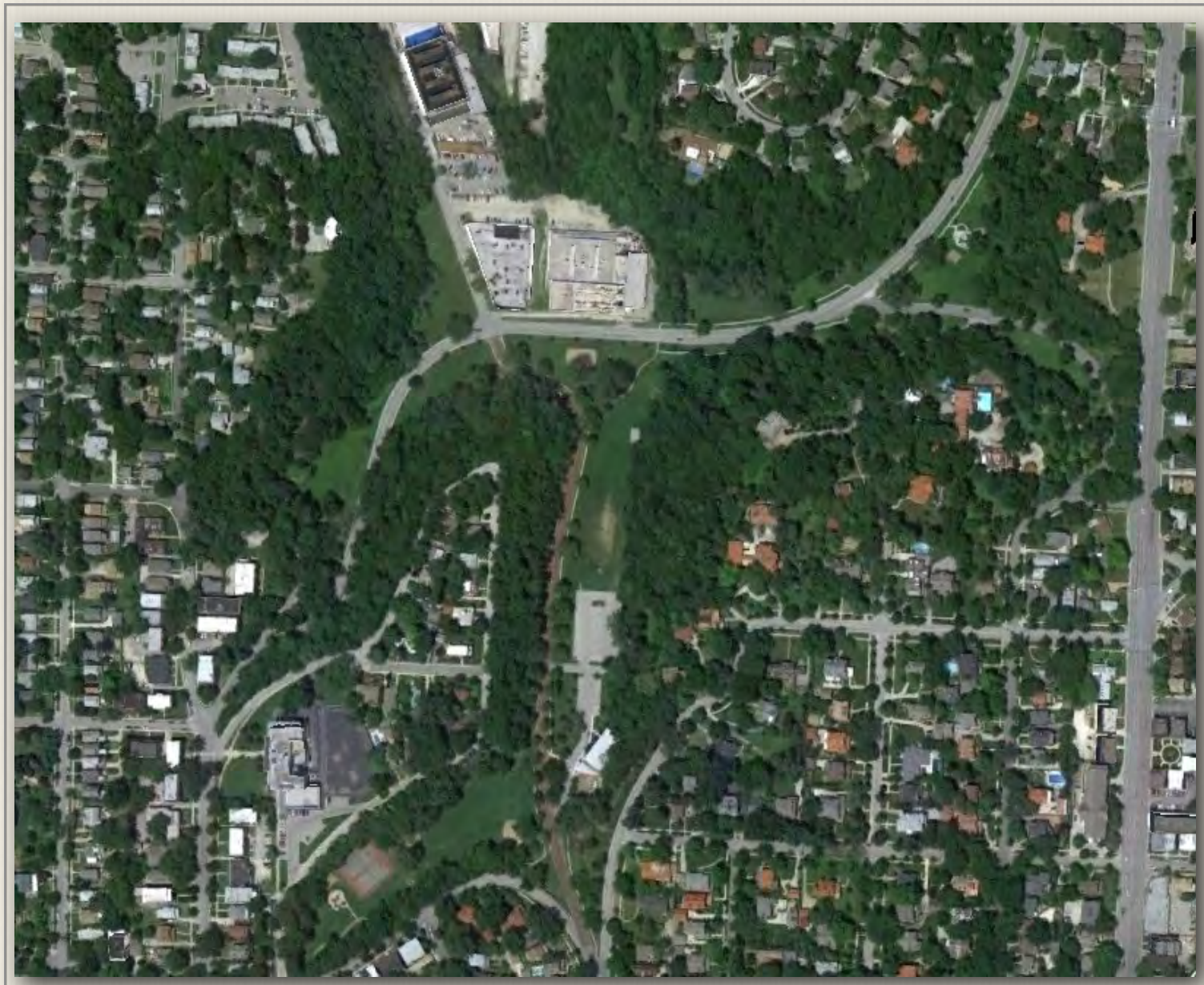
Aerial View of Roanoke Park

    While Roanoke does have some flat areas for fields and unprogrammed activity, and a community center, it has several inherent flaws that hinder its use:

  • It sits on land well below where all the residences are – there are almost no direct eyes on the park.
  • It is not on a pathway to any key destination for neighborhood residents
  • It's cut up by a series of roadways that encourage speeding
  • Much of the land is physically attractive, but not usable as public space

    Now, some might say – why does it matter whether the land is used or not, as long as it's still beautiful? And, that's true to a degree – beauty is important for life in the city, and I don't mean to minimize it. The problem is that in cities, people need usable public space, and in particular need it as a part of their daily experience. The Kessler system, like many City Beautiful systems around the country, is indicative of a rural mindset – that wild nature should be integrated into the city in order to tame it, because cities themselves are inherently ugly. And, that nature is always superior to urbanity. In fact, these systems have more in common with State and National parks than city parks.

    120 years after the Kessler plan, we now have a more refined understanding of life in cities, and have overcome the problems of the Industrial age. Our cities are much cleaner and far less crowded (the latter is not necessarily a good thing). We still have a need for larger-scale recreation, but what our cities most lack is well-designed public space, in the places where we actually need it. In fact, in Kansas

City, MO, there are no parks or plazas at all in the actual "activity" centers – Westport, Brookside, Waldo, Country Club Plaza (Mill Creek Park is off to the side), Crossroads and even Downtown to a large degree. There are none that are along a pathway to take people to those places, except for the Trolley Track Trail, an urban rails-to-trails project. That job is left to parkways and boulevards, but they are designed almost entirely for cars.

Of course, this is not by accident. Development interests fought any inclusion of parks in the actual neighborhoods or established commercial areas of the city at the time of the Kessler Plan. Once again, short-term interests over-ruled the long-term benefits of the city.

The city does have some newer public spaces built by developers, to make up for the lack of true public spaces. Crown Center Square is a nice space, but was designed for an inward-looking development, and its own lack of a connection to Washington Square Park. The Power & Light District has its "living room" and associated pathways, which have shown the popularity and need for even quasi-public space. It's these kinds of features the city is largely missing – places to socialize while doing other things – shopping, dining out, going to church, etc. The current park system is almost entirely about recreation, movement or quiet contemplation – the rural ideal. Very little of it is about urbanity.

My proposition is that it's time we acknowledge the deficiencies of these City Beautiful-inspired systems (many other cities are similar), and look for ways to make targeted improvements. Why do these things? The social life of cities is what attracts people to them; it differentiates them from suburban and rural life. We spend thousands to go to far-away places and hang out in their piazzas, plazas and squares. Why not build more of them ourselves, and create that same kind of social life?

How do we do that? Stay tuned for some specific ideas in Part 3 of this series.

Designing solutions

Parts 1 and 2 of this series dealt with some analysis of public space. What is a well-designed park, square or plaza? What makes some work and others not as much? Why is this even important?

The obvious next question is – what can be done about it? Knowing what we know today, what should we do differently? That's what will be addressed in this piece.

First, to reiterate: well-designed public space, whether it's parks, plazas, squares or streets, are critical to life in a city. If we don't have attractive and useful spaces, people won't ever walk, ride bikes, or take public transit in any significant numbers. This is important if you care about the life of our cities and towns, their ultimate success, and especially the revitalization of places older than 60 years.

Having a vision is great. Getting the zoning right is critical. But, without the right attention to the space outside the building, and without quality spaces for socializing, our cities and towns will fall far short of their potential.

In this piece, I'll focus again on Kansas City, and what can be done to remedy some of the flaws I identified in Part 2. But, this is not just about Kansas City. Numerous cities across America were developed with a very similar approach to park and public space design. The City Beautiful ideals practiced in Kansas City were widely utilized, in places like Omaha, Dallas, Denver and many more, both large and small. Many of these same propositions could be implemented elsewhere.

The overriding message I'd like to convey is that we need to more highly value the daily integration of parks and plazas, not the occasional recreational or rural image of parks. It's the daily social life of cities (as William H. Whyte used to describe it) that makes them desirable places to be.

How do we better value them? By focusing on two key facets – design and location. When it comes to design, simpler is always better, as it's often the most simple, "boring" park designs that get the most use. Let people program the space themselves, and keep your designers restrained. Focus on those key elements that Holly Whyte emphasized in his work.

But location is another matter. Too often, we're saddled with parks and public spaces in the wrong place. For neighborhoods and cities to thrive, public spaces absolutely must occupy "prime" land that could easily be developed. Their function should be placed in the primary role, not secondary to land that could have buildings on it otherwise.

In Kansas City's case, a look at some specific cases helps to point the way towards what could be done, given the will to do so.

Westport, a generally successful entertainment / neighborhood center, lacks a true gathering space. A redevelopment from the 80's called Westport Square actually is not near a square of any kind. And yet, directly in the middle of the area sits a large amount of land, lying desperately in wait for people to use it. How

Aerial of Westport, with the potential Square highlighted

On-the-ground view of the parking lot in Westport

is the space used now? Sadly, it's a parking lot. And not just any parking lot – a free parking lot. The land is valued so little that people aren't even charged anything to park here. Imagine if the middle of Westport actually had… a square, surrounded by buildings that faced it, and parking moved off to the perimeter. Imagine live music in the middle, people having lunch outside in a dignified space and a space for viewing some of the oldest buildings in the city without worrying about traffic.

Next up: Country Club Plaza. Imagine this… what if the Plaza actually had… wait for it… a plaza?! This landmark piece of Kansas City is excellent in most respects. But one area that it disappoints is that there's no outdoor gathering space of any substance, except for Mill Creek Park on the edge. And, accessing the park requires crossing busy and fast-moving Broadway Boulevard. However, in the midst of the Plaza is a space that is nothing more than one-story buildings and the top of an underground parking garage. I've often used this block as a good example of how to line a parking lot with simple one-story buildings. But what if this block instead was a true public plaza, with built edges that were more permeable to bring people into it. In fact, the edges could even grow taller in time, creating a stage-set of sorts that would feel like a smaller version of the Plaza Mayor in Madrid. Using quality design could draw people into an unsuspecting

Aerial of Country Club Plaza, with potential Plaza site highlighted.

Street-level view of one of the one-story buildings that lines the view of the current parking lot.

space of beauty and grandeur. Simply imagine the uniqueness this space could

present, and how well-used it would be. Design: tricky, but talented people could definitely solve it, and with an overall minimum amount of short-term changes.

Another Midtown example, on a smaller scale, exists in the Volker neighborhood near 39th Street and Bell. This neighborhood center is a [main-street style strip of shops along 39th Street](#), supported by the residences around it, as well as KU Med Center. An unfortunate suburban-style building at Bell Street actually reveals an opportunity for this neighborhood. The parking lot on the corner has a small number of spaces dedicated to the strip mall that sits behind it. Now again use your imagination, and picture this as a public square, with a new, larger building behind it. The space would instantly create far more value, and provide some much-needed space for people to just sit and enjoy the neighborhood. As a major destination for foodies in the area, just imagine the ability to sit outdoors here in an attractive space and eat. The cost: about 16 parking spaces (plus 6 for the building next door), some landscaping and sweat. The long-term benefit: immeasurable.

Aerial of 39th Street / Bell intersection, with potential square highlighted. Parking lot to the east is also an easy candidate for use as public space
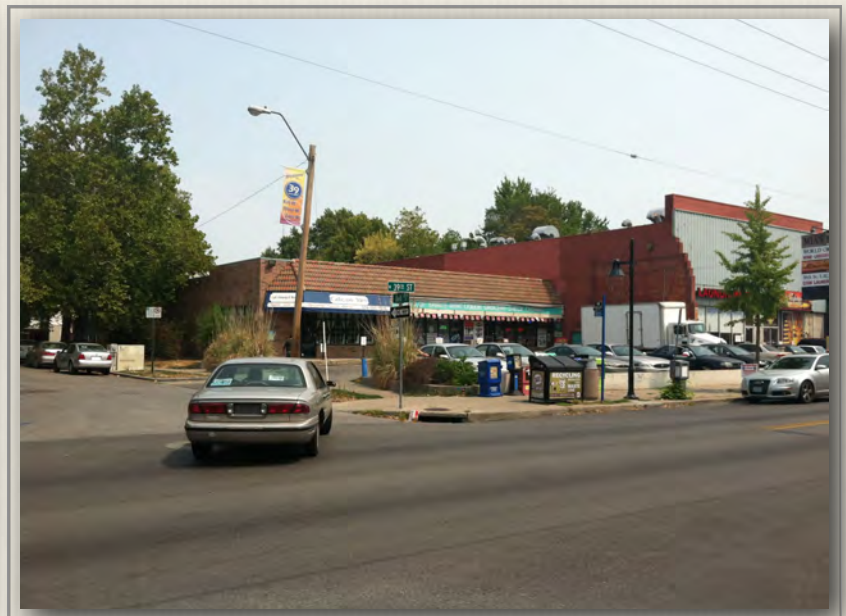
View of existing parking lot and strip mall building.

The [City Market](#) area provides a final example. The market itself provides a vital and entertaining function for the City. Interacting with the merchants, visiting on market day, etc is always an enjoyable mix of chaotic and interesting. The problem is, it's only truly used that way on one day per week. The other days of the week, the central portion of the City Market is nothing more than an ugly

Aerial of current City Market setup, showing the area that could be used daily as a public plaza.

View of City Market on a normal weekday, showing the drive lanes and parking.

parking lot and series of driveways. A few simple changes could tangibly change how the whole market works, and additional future improvements can spice it up. First, make the central portion of the market a true square, with no vehicles allowed. Second, open up Main Street again to through traffic. Third, re-work the parking areas and the sad little park along 3rd Street so that circulation is better and market-day vehicles can be accommodated. Some creative thinking about how vendors can load, unload, store and sell their merchandise on market day can make this a better space on a daily basis, year-round.

In real terms, some of these improvements are quite easy – they involve almost no true demolition and reconstruction. Others require some long-term effort and thinking. They all could benefit from the kind of thinking that goes by the name Tactical Urbanism or Build a Better Block. And, this is just a beginning – certainly other neighborhoods and parts of the city could benefit from this approach.

In a broader sense, these examples outline a 21st century approach to public space in our cities. The approach acknowledges that we've done some things well and others not so well. We have some excellent legacies from the past, but a great deal of those remnants don't serve us well, or were designed with something else in mind. For our cities to succeed long-term, we must put people and sociability at the forefront of our decision-making. It's not good enough to have some green on a map, or to build a bike lane or two.

The final part of this series will return to the big picture, and explore an overall theory for public space, and some further strategies on how to get there. As a teaser, consider this a recipe for your own community:

Mix In:

One part of Parks, plazas and squares in places where they're needed

One part of true bicycle infrastructure, including bike boulevards, cycle tracks, bike sharing and bike parking

Two parts of ubiquitous <u>Complete Streets</u>

Flavor to taste: the Removal of high-speed roadways in the middle of cities, and knitting cut-off neighborhoods back together

Stir these up, bake at a high temperature, and savor the results. You won't be disappointed.

Time to be bold

Since [Malcom Gladwell](#) penned "The Tipping Point" in 2000, pundits, writers and journalists of all stripes have been obsessed with calling the next "tipping point" in their own particular field. It's no different in urban planning. For over a decade, New Urbanists and Smart Growth advocates have been claiming we're at or past the tipping point where the public fully embraces walkable communities. As someone who regularly works and visits communities far from the coasts, I've been a skeptic. Yes, there's been a remarkable change in awareness and attitudes, but I've often felt that in reality we've only been reaching a small percentage of the broader public.

But lately, my mind has been changing. The more I travel around and see change first-hand, as well as read up on what is going on in our communities, the more it's clear that there is in fact a tipping point coming. None of us can ever say exactly when these things happen, but it feels likely that within the next ten years (and perhaps sooner) we'll see a remarkable shift away from the car culture that has been our national obsession for over 80 years. And, this is something that won't be obvious in places we expect, such as the largest metropolitan areas in the country. We'll see it across the spectrum – in the mid-size cities, small towns and rural areas that make up the vast geography of the continent.

The question is – is your community ready for it?

By no means am I saying we are abandoning cars. The option of personal mobility with a car is something that will be with us as long as we have fuel to drive. But what is changing is the wholesale obsession that every person owning a car, and using it for nearly every trip in his or her day is a component of the good

life. People are realizing that we like to walk. We like to bike. We enjoy a lifestyle that doesn't make us slaves to gasoline, parking and traffic. We crave that freedom that only can be had by truly having options., including options on how to transport ourselves around.

So what is the relationship between these changes and this series on public space? Simply, public space is the most critical element to making our cities walkable and desirable. As people rediscover urbanity, having quality public space in the right place will be essential to the good life going forward. Parts 1, 2 and 3 of this series outlined some theories and approaches to public space. This last part outlines a way forward.

Of course there's never just one way to achieve success. But in the typical American context, our cities would do well to stick to these initiatives in particular:

1. Build/rebuild parks, plazas and squares in the places where they are most needed

Johnson Square, in Savannah, GA. The Savannah plan is a 280 year old example of how to integrate quality public space where it's needed

2. Complete a true network of bicycle infrastructure, including cycle tracks, bike boulevards, bike sharing and bike parking

A 2-way cycle track in Portland, OR. This type of inexpensive, easy improvement can be done immediately on the miles of overly-wide boulevards and parkways that traverse our cities

3. Remake our existing streets so that they balance the needs of all users – pedestrians, bikes, transit and cars

Baltimore Ave in Kansas City, after the street was re-made from a wide, 4 lane street. The new configuration allows twice as much on-street parking, slows traffic, and makes it a far more inviting environment for pedestrians, cyclists, and yes, businesses. Again, some simple paint and signage changes don't make it beautiful, but it's cheap and effective, and can improve over time.

4. Remove high-speed roadways that cut through cities, and knit back together neighborhoods that were mistakenly separated

Along the Embarcadero in San Francisco, this streetcar line and the new boulevard along it were built to replace a freeway that was damaged during the Loma Prieta earthquake. Despite dire warnings from traffic engineers, the new street has been an overwhelming success both economically and for livability.

5. Encourage bottom-up incremental efforts from people to improve their own blocks

Along Sunset Boulevard, in the Silver Lake area of Los Angeles, an impromptu plaza has been created by closing off a portion of one street at a triangular intersection. While not beautiful (by traditional standards) today, this sort of intervention is a great way to reclaim needed public space in a busy area, and can easily improve over time. Simple, cheap, effective.

In a broader sense, these examples outline a 21st century approach to public space in our cities. The approach acknowledges that we've done some things well and others not so well. We have some excellent legacies from the past, but a great deal of those remnants don't serve us well, or were designed with something else in mind. For our cities to succeed long-term, we must put people and sociability at the forefront of our decision-making. It's not good enough to have some green on a map, or to build a bike lane or two.

While some of these efforts would take years to materialize, others can begin immediately. We can take advantage of the linear features of the City Beautiful plans to create exceptional bike boulevards, slow down car traffic, and encourage mixed uses along them. We could even consider leasing or selling some of the great amount of excess parkland that is not usable or not needed. It sounds like heresy, I know, but cities are not museums for park design – they are places for people to use.

Cities have other techniques available to them, especially when it comes to the task of creating public space in the right place. In some cases, this will involve the outright purchasing of property for public use, and demolition/rebuilding. The Redfields to Greenfields proposal and the City Parks Alliance suggest using the current real estate depression as a means to create long-term land banks. That's certainly one approach, and could be especially useful to add more formal, less programmed neighborhood parks where they are needed. Another is to use value capture mechanisms (more on that in a future post) in order to fund necessary public improvements, such as squares or plazas or more commercialized areas.

All of these are worthy of exploration. Whether they all work or only some, we need to put the spotlight back on usable public space for people. And, we need to do it with a sense of urgency. Today's combination of rising demand, deflated real estate and low interest rates will not last for long. The time to be bold is now, to prepare our cities for the next hundred years.

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