

Lisa Rochon: Cityspace

Squaring public space with human needs

[Lisa Rochon](#) | [Columnist profile](#) | [E-mail](#)

Paris— From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Nov. 25, 2011 3:30PM EST

Place des Vosges always draws me to its magnificent truths whenever I visit Paris. But, last weekend under a cloudless autumn sky, the 17th-century square seemed especially ageless – and, for the makers of public space back home in Canada, freshly instructive.

The prototypical European square was packed with children in classic blue cardigans playing make-believe in the sandboxes and with teenaged boys playing raucous games of soccer on the fine gravel. Along the edges of the square – past the geometric lawns of grass – friends, lovers and families were folded into conversations at tiny restaurant tables under the sheltering, arched arcade. Girlfriends peered into the artisan shops and haute-couture boutiques. Tired-looking fathers cradling babies, and elderly couples in stiff woollen coats gathered on the wooden benches near the rows of clipped, leafless linden trees, bathed in the warm rays of sun.

Four hundred years ago, this square laid down a new framework for public space – a multifunctional urban meeting ground – where social behaviour is learned and celebrated. Conceived as a glorious living room, the square contrasts its treed, grassy landscape, ordered by strict Cartesian logic, with the robust textures of the burnished red-brick townhouses surrounding it on all sides. Intellectuals and political elites have called it their home, from Victor Hugo to the dethroned Dominique Strauss-Kahn, whose apartment, during my visit, was shuttered to the world. Everybody – Parisians and tourists alike – love to breathe the air in Place des Vosges, which is why Canadians cross the Atlantic to experience its heady perfume.

And yet, when it comes to making park and public spaces back home, we resist its valuable lessons. Why?

“Most designers are into their own ego rather than creating something remarkably human,” says Fred Kent, who founded the New York-based Project for Public Spaces (PPS) in the 1970s after helping to chart the behaviour of people in streets and parks with groundbreaking sociologist William H. Whyte.

Their research resulted in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980), considered a classic among urban designers. Since then, PPS has contributed the master plan for the revitalization of Manhattan’s once-derelict Bryant Park into a public square that sparkles with crowds of people drawn to concerts, restaurants and treed lounge areas.

The agency is currently working on placing new marketplaces in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, and catalyzing some 300 small spaces, over the next five years in cities in the southern hemisphere, for the human-settlement agency UN-Habitat. “It’s only in the last 20 years that public space has become important again,” Kent told me this week. “But we don’t have a lot of really great public

spaces that are people places.”

Vancouver’s Granville Island, he suggests, for good reason, is an exception. Its variety of publicly accessible spaces wonderfully combine culture with food markets and harbour jobs. But Kent is unimpressed with the intensification of Vancouver’s waterfront and its tracts of land bisected by bike paths.

Unlike Stockholm, for instance, where restaurants and highly active parks connect effortlessly in and out of the water, he notes, “Vancouver’s waterfront has been ruined by its new communities of high-rise towers surrounded by isolated playgrounds with no seating, or isolated rocks. They’re designed for people who don’t want much to happen in front of them. There’s no sense of life or delight.” It’s a barrenness that plagues Toronto’s metastasizing condo neighbourhoods.

Though it may sound simplistic, public space works ideally to the power of 10: suggesting 10 different activities in 10 different areas within any given space. Measured this way, Dufferin Grove Park at Bloor Street and Gladstone Avenue in Toronto’s increasingly trendy Bloorcourt Village is a remarkable people place: home to a farmers’ market, fruit and vegetable gardens, a summer snack bar, a whimsical children’s playground, a wading pool, community suppers, two bake ovens, ice rinks, tennis and basketball courts, and nighttime campfires.

© 2011 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.