This Space is Mine, Yours, and Ours: A Thoughtful Review of Public Spaces and Community Ownership

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Abstract
The public realm has long been a place for demonstration, interaction, and experience. Thus, this realm has been the focus of much careful study and thought through the years. Given that significance, these public places should belong to the community at large. With ownership comes pride and responsibility, both of which are foundational elements in establishing a sense of community. The perception of ownership in a public setting can decidedly determine the success or failure of a place. When the community collectively owns a space, the intrinsic riches that community reaps are innumerable.

To ensure collective and equitable ownership, public places within the community must be born out of a democratic dialogue. This paper aims to guide that dialogue by employing a series of metrics with which to evaluate five built, public projects of varying scales and degrees of permanence. The metrics considered are: 1) functional efficiency, 2) social equity, 3) economic feasibility, 4) environmental sustainability, and 5) cultural sensitivity. While these metrics are not absolute, they provide a framework with which to analyze and understand how spaces can foster ownership and create lasting public spaces.

The intent of this research is not to determine the outright success or failure of these projects, but rather to learn from them. That knowledge can then inform a critical framework, comprised of appropriate metrics, to aid planners in creating spaces which enhance and support community ownership. The determination of success is a right that should always reside with those who own the space.
Introduction
The public realm has long been a place for demonstration, interaction, and experience. In this arena, the impact of design can ripple through a community harmoniously or disruptively. In some cases, the final design is a product of both. Thus, this realm has been the focus of much careful study and thought through the years. Given that significance, these public places should ultimately belong to the community at large. A sense of ownership can be a product of design. As design and planning professionals, it is our charge to create spaces that foster that emotion. With ownership comes pride and responsibility, both of which are foundational elements in establishing a sense of community. The creation of community can come in many forms. However, through an analytical lens, we can better understand just how that creation of place came to be. The perception of ownership in a public setting can decidedly determine the success or failure of a place. When the community collectively owns a space, the intrinsic riches that community reaps are innumerable.

To ensure collective and equitable ownership, public places within the community must be born out of a democratic dialogue. That dialog is an integral part of the community engagement that should take place in any public project. Despite its prevalence in the design and planning process, the dialogue aspect is not the specific focus of this paper; though, each case study reviewed engaged in robust community engagement processes. This paper aims to guide that dialogue by employing a series of metrics with which to evaluate five built, public projects of varying scales and degrees of permanence. The metrics considered are: 1) functional efficiency, 2) social equity, 3) economic feasibility, 4) environmental responsibility, and 5) cultural sensitivity. While these metrics are not absolute, they provide a framework with which to analyze and understand how spaces can foster ownership and create lasting public spaces.

Research Approach
The intent of this research is not to determine the success or failure of these projects, but rather to learn from them. That knowledge can then inform a critical framework, comprised of appropriate metrics, to aid planners in creating spaces that enhance and support community ownership. The appropriate metrics can vary, though they should often address concerns regarding functionality, economics, the environment and, of course, people. To effectively understand the breadth at which an individual metric can be explored, a series of case studies have been selected and studied to illustrate the point accordingly. Though each case study certainly addressed multiple metrics, it was important to isolate a single metric, for the sake of this paper, to understand its direct impact on the success of a single project. However, the actual determination of success is a right that should always reside with those who own the space.

Introduction to Case Studies
To help provide a context for the metric framework, this paper will highlight five placemaking projects. While there are many exemplary projects world-wide that demonstrate the effectiveness of the metrics model approach, these five projects were chosen based on the authors’ knowledge of the design and project history. All five projects are products of MIG, Inc., the authors’ place of employment. Many of the projects chosen could be used to demonstrate multiple metrics,
however for this paper, we have chosen to highlight the best project example applicable to a particular metric. The five projects selected are:

**Boston Downtown Crossing Urban Design Strategy**
The Boston Downtown Crossing Strategy was a joint effort, uniting many public and private entities, to establish a new walkable and active commercial core in downtown Boston. The project created new pedestrianized streets and activated both alleyways and public plazas. Furthermore, it helped spur the development of a business improvement district, and ultimately created a budding new culture and life for a revitalizing area.

**Ankeny/Burnside Development Framework**
This project is located in Portland, Oregon and helped to achieve a community vision for the Ankeny/Burnside neighborhood area. Interventions included a vibrant new streetscape, an adaptive open space environment that can respond to weekday versus weekend uses, and a redesigned Saturday Market that provided a new street environment and opportunities for social interaction.

**Golden Triangle Neighborhood Plan**
The Golden Triangle Neighborhood is located near downtown Denver and over recent years has become part of a transformation into a more ‘urban’ environment. This, is part, is due to Denver’s continued growth and the strong investments in the region. This project helped identify and outline strategies to achieve the goal of becoming a vibrant ‘urban village’ with a diversity of uses and users, walkable public spaces, and an identifiable culture.
Hemisfair Yanaguana Gardens
The Gardens project, developed with the Hemisfair Park Area Redevelopment Corporation, had the explicit vision of creating a new public gathering space on a former convention site and a park in central San Antonio. Yanaguana Gardens is one component of the final Hemisfair site plan. Yanaguana was designed to be an interactive and social play environment for children of all ages. The design is sensitive to the local culture and provides a fun and imaginative place for families.

Huntington Beach Pier Plaza & South Beach Improvements
This project, in Huntington Beach, California, utilized a series of landscape improvements and physical interventions to better connect and enhance access to downtown, the promenade walking system and adjacent beach area. Art installations, including tiles, sculptures, and murals were employed to echo the area’s history and culture and were ultimately incorporated into the plazas, open space areas, pedestrian promenade and amphitheater.

Introduction to Metric Framework
A qualitative critique, devoid of substance, is an ineffective approach to discussing or analyzing a project or space. However, a solely quantitative critique, bound strictly by statistics and numbers, is often lacking the human perspective that warranted the critique in the first place. It is the authors’ opinion that the approach to an effective critique and analysis lies somewhere in between the two. Establishing a sufficiently broad series of quantitative metrics can then organize the approach while allowing for an emotive response. Fortunately, the foundation for these methodologies has already been established. Though other metrics of a similar nature can be seen throughout the allied professions, this paper employs an approach created by Dr. Mark Frederickson, founder of the Tejido Group, an international and interdisciplinary community outreach design and planning organization. Dr. Frederickson honed these metrics over the past few decades prior to his retirement from the College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture at the University of Arizona.
Five Metrics to Creating Community
Truly impactful design tends to be interdisciplinary in nature. Employing a diverse skill set will often result in the most effective solutions. These strategies can manifest in a number of ways, however, the resultant designs should always strive for the formation of intelligent and versatile community fabric. As both a catalyst for growth and an asset for communities, the following metrics can help to craft design and planning solutions that are functionally efficient, socially equitable, economically feasible, environmentally responsible and culturally sensitive.

Functional Efficiency
There are several means by which to determine the functionality of a space, however, the primary consideration should focus on connectivity. The movement to, through, and from a space is a critical part in the creation of a successful design solution. Circulation is, in simple terms, the primary determinant of form in many environments. In addition to the design of effective circulation within a given program, considerations should be given to appropriate site programs, the short-term and long-term maintenance requirements, and safety for all user groups. Contextually-appropriate site programs that allow for unburdened maintenance, and as necessary, programmatic flexibility, will inevitably increase the use of a space. The increased use of a space is what ultimately creates a safe environment.

Social Equity
Opportunities for social interaction, in urban settings and otherwise, provide us with the means of stimulation and release that are essential to our daily lives. As human beings, we are social creatures. It is an art that carried us through evolution and into the internal interactions, chance encounters, and regular conversations we have today. Those occasions allow for personal growth through learning - about ourselves, each other, or something greater. The anonymity of the urban form can detract from this potential. It is therefore important to provide spaces where all user-groups can interact. This allows for the dismantling of many socio-economic barriers that inhibit the equitable exchange of thoughts and ideas. Design, in a public setting, ultimately has one client – the public, in whatever form they take.

Economic Feasibility
Despite the good intentions of any design within the public realm, there are economic realities a solution must cater to. The charge is to manage the economic feasibility of a project, while balancing the overall quality of the design. If a project is not economically viable, the realities of many well-intentioned solutions will likely never come to fruition. However, though a project must be economically viable, there are numerous vantage points from which to consider how it can become so. A truly financially conscious design will consider both the near-term realities and the potential for future increased land values and tax bases. The fine-tuning of the scale and scope of a design can also help to navigate a tougher financial market. Urban design and landscape architecture elements are often more financially nimble. Their design and implementation can help stimulate further economic development in an area. The inability to design due to economic and programmatic restraints will ultimately result in stagnation, robbing the designer and client of a successful project and the community of a successful place.
Environmental Responsibility
Given the trajectory of certain global patterns and the present opinions of a vocal minority, this metric bears the most weight in designing our future. Environmental Responsibility can be defined in several ways, and as such, is comprised of many design considerations. The variety of scale, the degrees of impact, and the method by which it is produced will often dictate the solution or solutions that are appropriate for a given project. Fortunately, the design and planning professions have elevated this metric and, through the years, have discovered and employed a number of innovative solutions. Within that range, in their application moving forward, it is important to rely on the context of a site to inform the appropriate solution. The largest solution may not always be the best one. The context is comprised of not only the environment, but the structure of the other metrics as well. Appropriate, sustainable solutions not only increase the quality of the environment for the end users, but for all manners of life.

Cultural Sensitivity
Cultural Sensitivity is perhaps the most intangible metric and therefore, the most difficult to describe. Acknowledging and embracing the culture of an area from a design perspective takes root in the past, present and future of a place. The historical perspective of what a place has been is important in informing what a place can be, from its form to its materiality. The present use and context is equally important as most design solutions will serve the existing. However, it is the consideration of what a place can be that requires the most culturally responsive approach. This metric strikes a delicate balance between what, at times, can be competing influences. By actively engaging the public, and embracing their culture, the champions of the proposed design solutions may very well be the end-user groups themselves, rather than the design team.

As noted, the five metrics employed in this paper are representative of a range of potential ordering systems by which to explore or analyze a project. One metric, in isolation, is not enough to provide a holistic understanding of a single case study example. However, that same metric is able to, in isolation, illustrate the enormous potential that, if considered and applied properly, it can have on a given practice. It is common for projects to incorporate more than one, though not all, of these metrics into the design and decision making process due to various constraints and realities. In an ideal scenario, these five metrics are working in harmony, and through the democratic dialog of robust community involvement, the outcome is a place that both fosters communal ownership and stand the tests of time.

Analysis of Metrics in Case Study Examples
The following section incrementally illustrates the five metrics (Functional Efficiency, Social Equity, Economic Feasibility, Environmental Responsibility, and Cultural Sensitivity) using five case studies to both demonstrate the merits of the metrics and provide specific examples of planning and design interventions that can be used to achieve a communal ownership of space. For each example, readers are asked to think about how the design of a place can be improved by considering that space through the eyes of the outlined metric framework. The intent of this section is not to assess each project’s success but rather to invoke critical thinking and provide discussion around the qualities that help define space and create community ownership.
**Functional Efficiency**

The function of a space is usually one of the first attributes to be defined. How will users operate in this space? Do they have sufficient access or are further interventions required? These are questions planners consider regardless of the scale of a project. The functionality of a space, as well as how people move through it and within it are critical components in the design. In order for a space to be well used, it must possess a certain level of accessibility and usability. As planners, how can we plan help ensure that the places we create achieve these qualities?

The Ankeny/Burnside Development Framework exemplifies the power by which a design can be created in nearly any location and thrive through functional efficiency. The heart of the historic Ankeny/Burnside neighborhood had diminished through the years. However, through the development framework, design solutions were employed that included improvements to Waterfront Park and Ankeny Plaza, as well as catalytic interventions within the public realm. Nestled in the Development Framework was a streetscape specific plan. That plan provided a blueprint to achieve the community’s vision and included a vibrant urban streetscape and open space environment that responded to changing uses both during the week and over the weekend. Furthermore, the redesign of the Saturday Market revitalized the street environment and mitigated the harsh underpass by creating a flexible framework with which site programs could evolve. The functional efficiency of strategic, physical interventions paired with flexibility and pedestrian-focused circulatory solutions helped to breathe life back into the heart of this neighborhood.

To consider the metric of functional efficiency as it relates to the planning field at large, it is important to understand the versatility from which it can be addressed. For example, in Burnside, existing, adjacent circulatory systems, of a variety of scales, helped to inform both the site program as well as the internal and external connectivity from a site. A context which has already produced a safe environment due to increased public use of the area may allow for certain site programs that do not need to mature over time. The focus should then be applied to the on-going, successful use of both the site and the adjacent context through unburdened maintenance. Designs that fall into disrepair often do so due to a lack of proper maintenance, thus resulting in a declining user-group population. It may very well be what’s deemed “a good design,” but without addressing the merits of functional efficiency, it will be an uphill battle to assure its long-term success. The constant and continued use of Burnside illustrates the pride a neighborhood can have in reclaiming one of their spaces.

**Social Equity**

A well-designed place can bring people together and encourage opportunities for social interaction and stimulation. Without these daily exchanges, people become stuck in their own lives, unaware and unengaged in their surroundings. Human beings are social beings and spaces that allow us to learn about ourselves, about others and about something greater make us a more connected and relatable populace. As planners, the challenge is often to create spaces that not only provide opportunities for interaction, but also engage people of different backgrounds, ages,
races, cultures, and socio-economic classes. How can the projects we design best achieve a social setting where all user groups can interact and become engaged?

The Hemisfair Yanaguana Gardens project is an example of a public space that, through its innovative and thoughtful design, created a community play destination for families in San Antonio to take a break from their daily lives and engage with their children and with others. The success of the project rests in its ability to attract and encourage social interaction across multiple ages, cultures and economic backgrounds. Part of a larger area redevelopment plan, the Yanaguana project is a community oasis for families of all ages. From splash pads and water play features, to murals and climbing trees, the design of this public space encourages exploration, physical and social interaction, and cultural relevance.

Public spaces should strive to dismantle socio-economic barriers and promote inclusivity and equitable access. While the Yanaguana Gardens project is not unique in its ambition to provide opportunities for social interaction, it does provide a model for successful, innovative planning. As planners, we need to continually think outside the box and create places that challenge people to engage in their surroundings and interact with others. Whether through small scale interventions like bench placement or tree shading in a local park, or larger-scale interventions like redefined park requirements and ADA accessibility standards, the provision of social equity must always be at the forefront of the conversation when designing spaces for people.

Economic Feasibility
While aesthetics and the physical design of a space are important elements, the economic viability or a space’s potential to enhance the surrounding economic climate are equally important and often less considered. While some projects many have the benefit of well-funded clients, others including community supported efforts may have little budget for public space enhancements. Therefore, what can we, as planners, do to help ensure that both the financially unburdened client and the community with limited scope can achieve productive community spaces?

The Boston Downtown Crossing project is an example of a public space and corridor enhancement strategic plan that, partly due to its economic viability as well as its ability to build-off of and boost the local economy, has been largely successful. From the start, the project had a strong financial backing, with many private and public investors interested in improving and enhancing pedestrian access to the revitalizing commercial and retail center. By directing future private development and public infrastructure investments into the area, including new developments and streetscape improvements, the plan was able to spur significant interest in the design of public spaces within the shopping district. Streetscape and pedestrian improvements, such as the pushcart vending program and the former police substation re-purposed to serve as a florist’s kiosk, both provide opportunities for smaller scale social interactions and support local vendors. Additionally, interest in the area spurred the development of downtown Boston’s first business improvement district.
While not all communities have the available resources for large scale interventions like the one conducted in Boston, there are lessons learned from this project that smaller communities can utilize. Boston’s ability to get stakeholders to the table and have them commit financially to the project helped ensure not only its initial success but also long-term investment needed to sustain the vision. Additionally, small-scale interventions, such as sidewalk improvements and space programming helped achieve an active social environment and would be possible on even a limited budget. Ultimately, any community project can achieve economic viability and vitality as long as the vision and goals outlined for their public space are realistic for their community and are reflective of the economic climate.

*Environmental Responsibility*

Often, the notion of environmental sustainability or environmental responsibility conjures up images of a soft, vegetated setting, devoid of pavement and many urban realities. While those solutions are certainly desirable, it is perhaps more commendable to locate solutions that form out of notable, urban restrictions, as those projects are likely to make the most difference within the communities that need them the most. With new technologies and evolving beliefs around what defines sustainability, planners are consistently pressed to create spaces that advance the environmental sustainability conversation.

The Golden Triangle Neighborhood Plan was one of those projects. In an urban neighborhood, located on the southern edge of Downtown Denver’s Central Business District, this plan aimed to shift the character of the neighborhood to align with the goals and aspirations of both its residents as well as its through-users (commuters). The residual effects in transferring the preferred mode of transportation ultimately helped in the reduction of noise pollution and carbon dioxide emissions, while increasing the overall physical activity and health of the residents, through alternative modes in transportation and the increase of vegetation in strategic pockets. This project, however, is most unique in that its physical manifestation initially occurred over a one-day pop-up event. The varied solutions experienced during this event inspired a much greater conversation. In fact, the recommendations from this project helped to spawn a larger study in which a major inbound/outbound couplet, moving over 60,000 vehicles per day, has produced a dedicated two-way cycle track and removed a lane of travel with minimal impacts to the overall traffic flow.

Ultimately, Environmental Responsibility is a metric than can include perhaps the widest range of elements and design solutions. The important part to note is that due to the vast potential, selecting and employing the right solution is essential. Not every design will call for expansive low-impact development, green infrastructure and the omission of all asphalt. However, carefully-considered design solutions can still employ smart, environmentally sustainable solutions that are crafted to their context. There is no ‘one answer’ or a catch-all for being environmental responsible. It takes a careful consideration of the environment in which you are designing and the realities of those restrictions. In the future, it may be that the success of initial low-impact recommendations is what primes the design area for a more robust solution. At the very least, a bicycle lane can start a much larger conversation. That stems from the excitement a commuter or resident will have in knowing they now have their own, environmental conscious alternative.
Cultural Sensitivity

Culture is perhaps the hardest thing to capture and express. The culture of a place helps define it, helps add intrinsic beauty and interest, and can create opportunities for educational and social interactions. For some projects, the injection of cultural aspects into design is simple, yet in others, the definition of intangible qualities can be insurmountable. As planners and designers of spaces for public consumption, we should strive to embrace the culture of ‘place’ and champion designs and interventions that will speak to the community and enhance their ownership.

The Huntington Beach Pier Plaza & South Beach Improvements projects effectively demonstrate how both tangible and intangible culture can be infused into design and used to enhance user experiences. For these projects, the addition of murals, painted tiles and sculptures helped support the nautical and beach culture so prevalent in the lives of the community. Simple art enhancements, like blue tiles imitating wave patterns, helped to provide a critical connection to the ocean. Other artistic elements, such as a sculpture of a surfer and metal fish adornments also evoke the sense of an ocean community culture and visually enhance the space for users.

The inclusion of culture does not have to be a barrier to the design of public spaces. While opportunities to integrate culture and history may not always be initially apparent, community engagement and discussion will help to identify both tangible and intangible qualities that define a place or a community. While history can be used as a proxy for culture, as planners, we should employ the same out of the box thinking we evoke in our designs to dig beyond the obvious and look for the true defining character of a place. Interventions can be small and range from artistic enhancements along a trail to sculptures and physical designs in plazas. Ultimately, a successful project will provide the community a place they can identify with, instilling pride, comfort and a sense of communal ownership.

Summary

The public realm has belonged, and shall always belong, to the communities that define it. As designers and as planners, we are charged with the creation of places that are accessible, equitable, lasting and ultimately generate opportunities for social engagement and ownership. While the metrics presented in this paper are not absolute, they provide a critical thinking framework with which to approach planning and public space design. The profession must always be poised to answer the question: Are the spaces we create functionally efficient, socially equitable, economically feasible, environmentally responsible and culturally sensitive? While no project needs to address all five dimensions, it is the authors’ opinion that a more holistic and measured approach to planning ultimately facilitates the design of innovative and inclusive spaces.

By considering not only the immediate impact of a space, but also its long-term role in the community, a place well-designed today can be a gateway of change for the future. As cities and towns across the world deal with the politics involved in managing growth and expectations, public spaces continue to be places where people can find sanctuary and excitement within their everyday lives. Spaces like ones created in the Yanaguana Gardens and the Huntington Beach Pier Plaza & South Beach Improvements projects will always be highly desired. The challenge
however, is to continue building spaces that push the envelope, invoke out-of-the-box thinking, and create new and vibrant places that boost cultural and social engagement in a seamless manner.

In a world with an ever-evolving economic climate, the task to overcome is in the creation of projects that are financially sustainable and that not only contribute to both the economic and social health of their community, like the Boston Downtown Crossing project has successfully demonstrated. Additionally, as our populace becomes more attuned to our natural surroundings and the impact our actions have on others, it is critical that our public spaces enhance the sustainable and resilient nature of communities. The action can be small, such as the deployment of a single bike lane, but can have an enormous impact on the health outcomes of the community.

The intent of this paper was not to determine the success of the five projects using the metric framework, but rather to learn from and understand ways in which planners and design professional can incorporate the complexities of multiple metrics into an objectively better design. Hopefully in doing so, this paper has evoked conversation about how we think about public spaces and the communities that define them both now and in the future.