

## The City Sociable

### Leveraging Physical Assets to Create Places for Civility and Sociability

#### PLANNING AND DESIGNING PLACES AND SPACES THAT CREATE SOCIAL CAPITAL

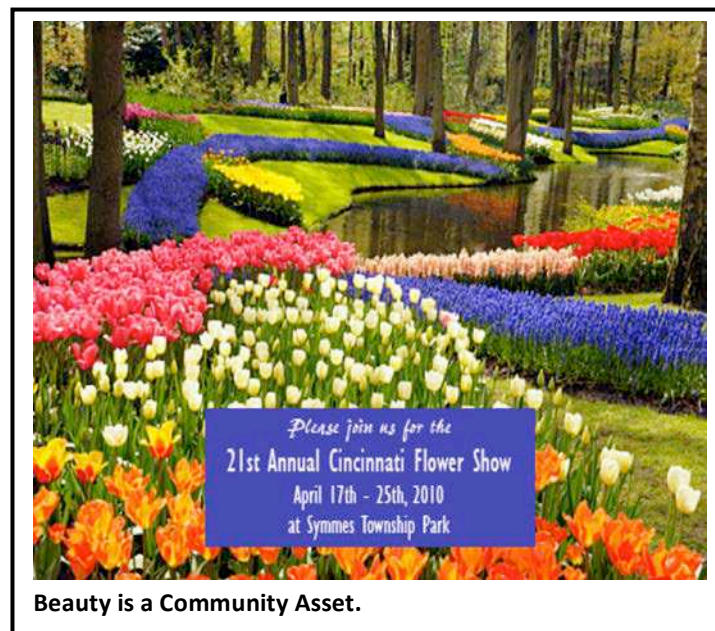
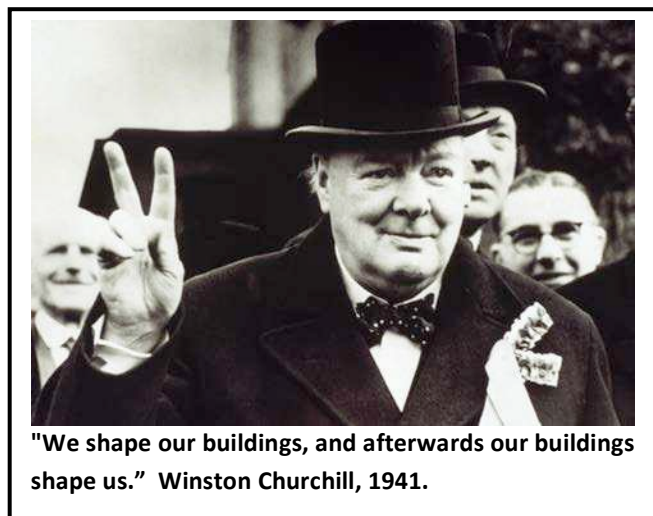
Some communities are great; many are not. As we strive to retain the greatness of the few and enhance the quality of the many, ideas about completeness can guide us. Complete cities, towns and places give us a sense of belonging, a sense of continuity, a sense of ownership, a sense of responsibility for the “the greater good.” A complete, livable community has a comfortable and equitable balance of the physical, economic and social aspects of life.

The challenge for planners of the physical realm is to use our planning and design skills to enhance the sociability and civility of our cities. Anonymity, isolation and lethargy are the enemies; planning places for civil and social discourse is the response. To paraphrase Sir Winston Churchill, we define our places, and then they define us.

**The purpose of this paper** is to present ideas that expand the thinking about building and urban design to anticipate the use and usability of private and public spaces for formal and informal social engagement.

Private places owned by banks, lawyers and others have traditionally offered their buildings, community rooms and patios to neighborhood associations, civic clubs and business groups for public events, workshops and meetings.

Libraries, hospitals, churches and schools have done the same, as have city and county governments. These publicly available places are important city assets for people to meet and discuss community issues and opportunities.



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### SUSTAINING, LIVABLE COMMUNITIES.

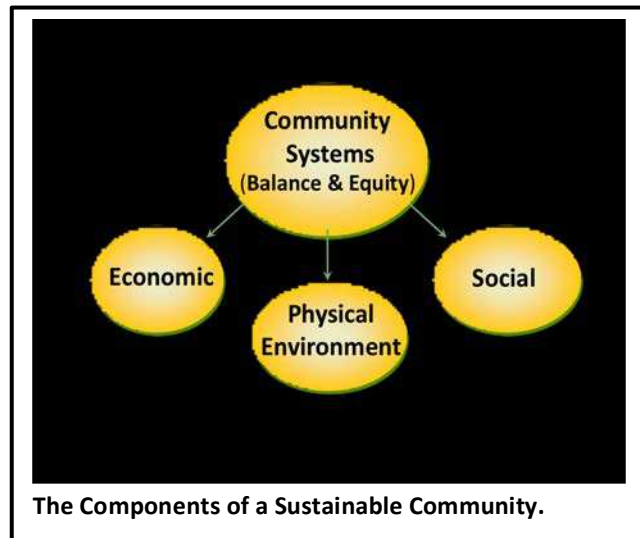
Cities, established and new, seek to balance the interaction of their physical, economic and social forces. Physical design plays an important role in establishing the framework for the success or failure of the community's economic and social life. While the inherent merits of the city's economic and social systems plays a major part, thoughtful physical design matters.

#### 1. Social Features.

Physical facilities designed with socialization in mind, encourage civic engagement, volunteerism and "ownership" of the public realm with settings that demand and encourage face-to-face exchanges of ideas; such places help a community amass social capital. Physical socialization assets are plazas, parks, public seating areas, active streets, cafes, restaurants with outdoor seating and casual gathering places in neighborhoods and "villages". These create the perception and the reality of community. Beauty has an inherent quality that brings people together. Beauty is a powerful socializer.

#### 2. Economic Features.

Community venues play two roles in economic development programs designed to increase family incomes and jobs. The first is to use the social and cultural value of a town to keep and attract employers; the second is that an interesting town with jobs and a strong socialization atmosphere keeps younger people in town, and attracts others. Successful community venues also ease the pressure on elected officials to cut the costs of important civic assets.



#### 3. Physical Features.

Neighborhoods can host a full spectrum of housing types and prices, along with parks, schools and community centers available for the PTA, the drama club, sports teams and other organized and casual groups.

Mixed Use Centers, in various sizes, are fine venues of community socialization, while commercially strips on major highways have limited resources for socialization activities. However, shopping centers, churches and apartments have places for congregation.

Urban infrastructure supports community sociability through multiple modes of mobility, parks, schools and civic places. Urban open spaces and beautiful settings found in natural and built environments enhance our lives and the sense of something larger than the individual. Gathering places amidst beauty favors civility and sociability.

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#### “COMMUNITIES OF INTERESTS”

Places of residence have historically dominated our lives. Neighborhoods, apartment buildings, small towns and villages provided the venue for most of our non-working interests. People focused on activities closer to home, be they church, club, work, sport, main street or entertainment. Communities of residence centered our lives.

In contemporary society, two things are happening. First, people have separated their place of residence from their places of work and interests. While the trend is toward re-establishment of the place-work-interest connection, today must deal with the separation, commuting and dissipation of our neighborhood-building energies.

The second trend is the single person household. In 2010, only 30% of households had children at home; 70% of household were single persons or couples without children. Both trends work against investing in neighborhoods.

The critical activity for planning and designing existing and new communities is to align people’s place of residence with their interests. The challenge is to find or create places where home-life, business-life and other interests intersect. **This is the prize: places of residence near places that hold our interests.**

Physical design can nurture every town:

- **Established cities**, where people live their entire lives, have had time to leverage physical assets to form social capital.

- **Transient towns** where people are “here today and gone tomorrow” are tough territories for social capital formation. There isn’t the time to make old friends, or to slowly melding of differences and to softening of hard social edges that accompany collective living. Long-term friendships and relationships are hard to form in a short time. These places require our best efforts to use physical assets to enable socialization. The military’s programs offer lessons about how to quickly assimilate diverse peoples that are constantly being transferred from one base to another.
- **New communities** have the opportunity to be designed, from scratch, with the spaces necessary to enable and encourage social development. New residents in new communities are “pioneers” and they often find this spirit to be the basis for social bonding. Communal uses such as cafés, post offices and libraries plus parks, plazas and wide sidewalks can assist in this goal of instant assimilation.



Always find a Place for a Farmers' Market.

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### A Model Action Plan to Align “Communities of Place” and “Communities of Interest”

1. **Engage stakeholders at the start** of the community planning and design process for new communities, established communities and those being re-developed to determine areas of interest.
2. **Build a multi-disciplinary team with the full range of expertise** in the physical, social science and economic aspects of community planning, design, operations and maintenance to assure that physical design responds to economic and social needs.
3. **Communicate early and often**, as if the success of the community depended on it. Establish reliable systems of personal, communal and electronic approaches to perpetuate the two-way conversation.
4. **Articulate and defend the community’s vision** conjured up by the residents, business owners and others with a stake in the community’s success. Meld “place” with “interest” by employing:
  - a. **Diversity in all things:** Diversify the general population, the housing stock, the mix of uses, the multiplicity of travel modes and the variety of natural habitat for plants and animals.
  - b. **Community amenities:** Provide open spaces, parks, cultural and educational places, public markets to accommodate a multiplicity of micro-events that promote sociability.
  - c. **Transparent and participatory community governance:** Engage citizens in activities and responsibilities to develop mutual aspirations, funding sources and communication systems.
  - d. **Beauty:** Demand beautiful places; they are more sociable and inspirational; they are more worthy of defense. Beauty is a powerful community-building tool.
5. **Construct funding and financial systems**, from the outset, that are reliable for sources for civic infrastructure and its perpetuation. This is foundational. Disputes over money are destructive.
6. **Get social outcomes from physical improvements** and facilities; design places, spaces, buildings, neighborhoods, infrastructure and amenities that accommodate, encourage and enable positive social and economic outcomes. Remember, physical amenities are just vessels for the activities and programs that engage people...all people, today and tomorrow. These outcomes don’t just happen; they must be caused, sustained and used.
7. **Be a “serious community”.** A “serious” community is a community with people who are trying to build a nice place to live for themselves, their families, their neighbors and their descendants.
  - a. Find, study, appreciate, and emulate other “Serious Communities”,
  - b. Conversely, reject “communities of opportunity” where people view their homes and businesses as short-term real estate investments, places that tolerate all take and no give, places where social capital is being diminished rather than accumulated.
  - c. Take the work seriously, for it is serious work.
8. **Make beauty and fun foundations of the city.**

Source: wckplanning.com

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### PHYSICAL AMENITIES THAT ENHANCE SOCIAL CAPITAL

Successful small cities, towns and new communities find ways to share the times of their lives. Community theaters, high school football, garden clubs, churches, post offices, pancake breakfasts, farmers' markets and town picnics create the opportunity for people and families to commune, to create and to share stories, to grow together.

Community leaders, private and public, in established and new towns, use physical facilities, properly funded, to support events and activities that promote community socialization and economic development.

Buildings and outdoor spaces available for community events are the main resource.

**Outdoor spaces** such as parks, patios, porches, plazas and gardens are often offered by private and public organizations for one-time use or periodic use for health and education classes, service club meetings and community events.



**A Public Garden centers a town & becomes a meeting place.**



**A Central Plaza is a great Multi-Modal Transportation Center.**

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**A Transportation Center** is a terrific case of a physical facility that serves to build community social capital. Centers have bus stops, transit centers, rental cars, taxis, shuttles, auto service, ride sharing and bike repair; anything one needs for mobility.

**Life-long Learning Venues** generally located at public schools, colleges or other venues offer educational events that are increasingly in demand as the pace of human knowledge growth quickens, as jobs become more demanding and as people have more leisure time to devote to learning. Physical places that host occasional or regularly sessions are useful.

**Buildings**, private and public, with community rooms, auditoriums, offices or other meeting spaces are often made available for:

1. Arts, Theater, Garden or Entertainment Clubs.
2. A Community Jobs Clearinghouse for Temporary or Part-time Work.
3. A Neighborhood Volunteer Clearinghouse for: Meals on Wheels, community foundation membership, school crossing guards, Neighborhood Watch coordinators, Visiting Nurses, and youth sports coaching.
4. A Business Education Center or Incubator.
5. A Pet Center for the care, training and boarding of animals.
6. Community Giving Foundations.
7. Service organizations such as Goodwill, YMCA, Salvation Army and the Boys & Girls Clubs.
8. Community Safety Training Programs.



**A Simple Small Stage Provides an Intimate Venue for Community Meetings and Performances.**



**In-Town Public Gardens are Attractive.**



**Community Centers Combined:**

- Elementary school,
- YMCA,
- Wellness Center and City Park.

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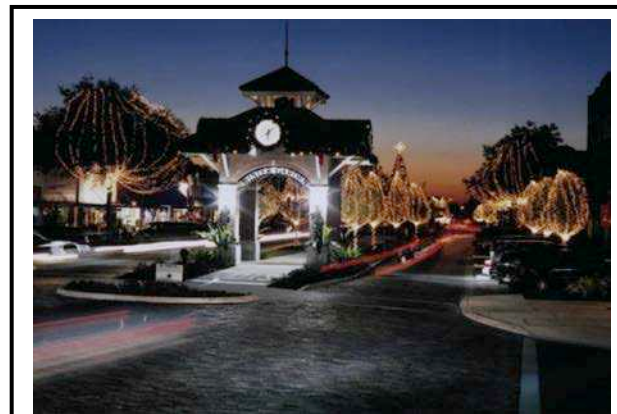
### PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY SOCIALIZATION AND CIVILITY

Society is based on the presumption that we will all abide by similar rules and customs of behavior. The physical design of communities acknowledges the requirements of civil society and attempts to create buildings and places with features that promote sociability and civility within the accepted framework of society. The basic principles of community socialization are:

- 1. Mutual Expectations.** Successful communities have commonly held expectations that most members of the society will behave in a similar manner in terms of sociability and civility, i.e., friendliness, consideration, supervision of children, maintenance of homes, tolerance of diversity. To ensure that everyone has the same community expectations, community visions and standards are periodically set by stakeholders with open discussion.
- 2. Broad-based Respect for Rules of Behavior.** The community needs to agree to abide by the local ordinances, standards, restrictive covenants, rules and other agreed-upon ideas for behavior in order to protect cultural and property assets, to support public management and to govern.
- 3. Rituals.** Practices repeated often enough become ingrained in community folk lore, such as, organizational bake sales, caroling, events to meet the new neighbors and celebratory parades. Rituals are the fiber of friendliness.



A Monthly Street Market.



Streets are important Public Spaces.



Plazas and Public Art; A Test of Community Values.

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4. **Mutual Respect for Community Assets, Education and Culture.** Schools, parks, community places and spaces demand respect and care that require consistent community attention and expense.
5. **Trust.** Trust evolves through experiences based on the shared values of life, feelings of safety, security and freedom. Trust in community leaders is earned through years of faithful service.
6. **Capacity for Self-Reliance.** Successful communities have or develop the capacity to solve problems, to fund physical and social infrastructure and the capacity to help one another in times of emergency. This capacity creates self-confidence that usually leads to better decisions, reduced tensions and increased community pride.
7. **Ubiquitous Connections** – Cities are connected through participation in local community activities, shared experiences between neighbors, awareness of opportunities to better the system and the commonly appreciated need for volunteers.
8. **Public Spaces Matter** - Parks, public places, sidewalks, post offices, libraries and cafés all contribute to random, casual encounters that solidify connections.
9. **Common Interest in Fun** – Cities with heart and soul also have humor and joy. Proud towns have a softness that exudes good humor. Serious towns have the confidence to lighten up. Community pride is usually associated with a smile as the virtues of the hometown are shared. Parades, jubilees, and music express a friendly nature.



The Library Fountain invites Public Play.

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#### GOVERNANCE: ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS FOR COMMUNITY SOCIABILITY

As new towns are planned and existing cities are rejuvenated, our social system requires governance. Many different systems of governance now populate our civic setting. There are traditional public entities with city councils and county commissions. There are also many private governments in the form of special taxing districts, business groups, infrastructure-based authorities, merchants' associations, homeowners' associations and condominium associations.

The principles for creating private governments to manage and operate the physical facilities that house our society are:

1. Governance needs a transparent and equitable organization that respects minority rights and the rule of law.
2. Governance organizations need to balance their role as agents for stability, and agents of change.
3. Transparent and candid communication systems build trust in organizations since trust comes in two types:
  - generalized trust...trust in strangers.
  - particularized trust...trust in people we know.
4. Mixed use places inherently foster communication due to the many places for scheduled and random encounters.
5. Private governance systems require careful design since they are contractual rather than constitutional and the relationship of representation, regulation and taxation can become abusive.



Publicly Accessible Buildings provide Space for Volunteer Workshops.

Publicize History.



Performances in Public Places.

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### PHYSICAL PLANNING TOOLS TO CREATE SOCIAL CAPITAL

**The Challenge** to physical planners, oft-times neglected, is to provide physical improvements to enhance and foster social capital and economic development. Buildings and outdoor spaces are designed to fulfill their traditional and commonly-held purposes, and they can enhance sociability and community civility. Values such as respect for the rules of mutual behavior, adherence to rituals, the capacity for self-reliance, ubiquitous connectivity, the perpetuation of fun-loving atmospheres and trust can be designed into public places and spaces.

**The Tools** available to the physical planner and community designer to create and enhance social and civic systems are several.

#### 1. The Physical Development Plan's Future Land Use Element.

The physical development plan locates buildings, streets, ponds and socialization-oriented amenities. Connections and beauty can promote social capital formation and economic development. Future Land Use and Circulation Plans delineate and articulate mixed use centers, multi-use corridors and neighborhoods with:

- **Buildings** that house public assembly activities like coffee shops, newspaper stands, theaters, city halls, libraries, community centers and fire houses.
- **Spaces/Places** for scheduled and random encounters such as gardens, dog parks, ball fields, walking trails, shoeshine stands, plazas and parks.

- **Physical Infrastructure** including multi-modal mobility systems for private vehicles, transit of all types, bikers and pedestrians, plus parks, schools, streets, utilities and shopping areas.
- **Natural Lands** for casual uses including parks and trails that integrate and traverse wetlands, upland habitats, water management areas and water bodies.

#### 2. The Social Infrastructure Plan.

The Social Infrastructure Plan identifies the programs and activities anticipated to create community spirit and hometown pride; and then to support these viscerally sensed activities through physical features that imbue the city and its' inhabitants with this spirit and pride. The Social Capital Plan contains programs and physical features to support sociability tasks, including, at least:

- **Staffed Activity Programs** with program directors and socialization agents,
- **Leadership Training** for community leaders and volunteers,
- **Philanthropic, entertainment, education,** and related activities served by charities, clubs and foundations.
- **Activities requiring Places for Assembly** in buildings and outdoor spaces,
- **Communication Systems** using traditional methods and all forms of social media to send and receive information and ideas, and
- **Pre-Designed Private Governance Systems** such as homeowner and property owner groups.

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3. **An Economic Development Plan** contains livability features that demonstrate why employers and employees people should stay in the community, or move to it.
4. **The Funding and Finance Plan** provides the framework to fund the amenities and necessities of the community. Government services are retreating and more of the burden for services is being born directly by businesses, residents and property owners through private governments. Public-private partnerships and other arrangements are needed to provide the level of civic amenities necessary to retain, expand and recruit businesses needed for a successful community.
5. **Marketing, Management and Maintenance Plans** are also necessary to continue to operate community activities for city agencies, special districts, not-for-profit entities and/or private community organizations.



Clubs are the Drivers of Successful Spaces.



Celebrating a new Public Place is a great Reflection of Community Spirit.



Sidewalks prompt Conversation.



A Docent takes to the Street.

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### CONCLUSIONS: LESSONS FOR LEVERAGING PHYSICAL ASSETS TO PROMOTE COMMUNITY CIVILITY AND SOCIABILITY

One can almost feel what creates successful culture, history, ritual and social capital.

The community designer's assignment is to listen and observe; then to apply the lessons learned from our successful and unsuccessful established towns and redevelopment areas.

The prize is a physical space that serves society's desire to be sociable and civil. The lessons are:

- 1. Social capital is a valuable asset worth protecting; once lost, it is hard to regain.** Many cities and towns are unpleasant, poor, hostile and hazardous. The reasons are many and profound, but, at the end of the day, successful towns have honest and competent leadership counts, a holistic, long-term idea about the future and a feeling that community needs must matter as much as individual needs. Protect and nurture community spirit.
- 2. City Master Plans for Buildings and Spaces are most useful when they connect with Social and Economic Plans** that enable new and existing cities to holistically enhance and sustain their community's livability.
- 3. Social Capital, Community Spirit and Pride benefit from properly designed buildings and spaces.** The built environment matters. Buildings, plazas, streets, parks and other civic spaces host the social infrastructure that enables people to be social and connected. Urban design can strengthen the city's social and economic prosperity.

- 4. Community Leaders are Social Capital Entrepreneurs.** The community's leaders and risk takers form the foundation upon which social capital stands. Social capital is not self-creating or self-regenerating. The city's Social Capital Plan should recognize, support and fully leverage leadership workshops and forums, high school programs, service club activities and the contributions the city's many not-for-profit organizations make to the community.



- 5. Fun is Fundamental.** Successful communities have a joy about them. They have the "soft" civic amenities that enable fun, frivolity, community enhancements and personal growth. Most serious towns have a light-hearted atmosphere. Commitments to public art, parks, parades, concerts and festivals reflect this attitude.

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### READINGS

The on-line literature abounds with articles on the general subject of social capital; some related to new towns. The work in Australia and Canada seems to dominate the field. This article has drawn upon the many good ideas in the works referenced below.

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