How to Design Our World for Happiness

The commons guide to placemaking, public space, and enjoying a convivial life

Jay Walljasper &
On the Commons

Table of Contents

Cover photos. Top: by stevebev under a CC license.
Bottom: by petercottle under a CC license.

Connection, Commons, and the Pursuit of Happiness

Why public life and community places matter so much in our lives

BY JAY WALLJASPER

At one point in my life, my neighbors and I were fighting battles on two fronts to protect our community. Our modest Kingfield neighborhood in Minneapolis was threatened on one side by the widening of a freeway, which would rip out scores of homes, and on the other side by the widening of an avenue, which would escalate traffic speeds on an already dangerous road.

I remember a dizzying round of strategy sessions, protest rallies, public meetings, more strategy sessions, and, eventually, victory parties, which wound up redirecting my life and work in gratifying ways. Until that point, I rarely thought about opportunities for improving people's lives by boosting public life and revitalizing public spaces.

When we stopped the widening of both Interstate 35W and Lyndale Avenue, I was shocked. That had never happened before around town. Road planners, armed with statistical models forecasting traffic congestion, were a powerful force in Minnesota. But not as powerful as citizens who feel a sense of ownership about their community and are willing to work together to save it. I realize now this effort was a shining example of the commons in action. We believed the neighborhood belonged to us, and we made it clear to city and state officials that we would actively participate in any decisions that affect its future.

As sweet as this triumph was, I felt a tinge of sadness. I would miss connecting regularly with these allies who through the months had become close friends. I needn't have worried. The all-out assault on Kingfield and surrounding neighborhoods instilled a profound sense of possibility in us. Further meetings and parties and brainstorming session and more parties were soon on the calendar. We recognized it was up to us to make the neighborhood safer, cleaner, more inclusive, interesting, and enjoyable. We joined together to prevent crime and host public events. My partner (and On the Commons co-director) Julie Ristau became president of the neighborhood organization and helped inaugurate a wave of community improvements. New coffee shops, restaurants, stores, and taverns opened.

Experiencing firsthand the collaborative capacity of everyday people to shape their own community has influenced me deeply as a writer, speaker, and consultant. Much of my work now focuses on how citizens can make the places they live better for everyone. The articles gathered here explore the wide horizons of what's possible in communities everywhere.

None of us in Kingfield used terms like "placemaking" or "commons" to describe what we were doing to improve the neighborhood. But I later realized that's exactly what we were doing. **Placemaking** means people taking action to preserve or restore a sense of place in their community, which enriches their lives in ways large and small. **The commons** refers to what we share together, including public places, as well as the rich web of human relationships that makes this sharing possible.

An understanding of the practices and the principles of the commons is an invaluable tool for placemaking efforts. (On the Commons and I are beginning a new Public Spaces & Public Life focus to help communities boost their sense of common connection and capacity. For more information, write me at Jay@JayWalljasper.com.)

Over the past decade the terms placemaking and the commons have become increasingly popular, a sign of the rising recognition about what makes our communities strong and alive. The book in your hands (or on your screen) chronicles many dimensions of this growing movement, whose impact can be measured in the numerous friendships, romances, business ventures, community initiatives, and other human connections that arise each day in public places around the globe. Yet the ultimate goal of placemaking and the commons is even more elemental: to expand the possibilities for happiness in everyone's world.

Jay Walljasper

Jay Walljasper is editor of *Commons Magazine* at OnTheCommons.org and Senior Fellow at On the Commons. He writes, speaks, and consults regularly on how new ideas in urban planning, economic development, tourism, sustainability, and the commons can improve our lives and communities. He is the author of OTC's book *All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons* and *The Great Neighborhood Book: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Placemaking* (with Project for Public Spaces). He was formerly editor of *Utne Reader* magazine and a Contributing Editor at *National Geographic Traveler*. He lives in Minneapolis and can be reached at Jay@JayWalljasper.com.

Jessica Conrad

Jessica Conrad is managing editor of *How to Design Our World for Happiness* and has served as the Content and Community Manager at On the Commons since 2011. Prior to joining On the Commons, she worked at Sol Editions as a researcher and writer for Lisa Gansky's *The Mesh: Why The Future of Business is Sharing* (Penguin 2010), a Wall Street Journal bestselling business book. Jessica has also been a grant writer for *The Promised Land*, a Peabody Award-winning public radio series featuring innovative thinkers who are transforming underserved communities. She lives in Minneapolis and can be reached at jconrad@onthecommons.org.

OnTheCommons.org

OnTheCommons.org is the website of On the Commons, a commons movement strategy center that: 1) Builds visibility for the commons movement; 2) Initiates and catalyzes commons work; and 3) Develops and encourages commons leadership. The website includes both *Commons Magazine* and *Commons Work*, an on-line resource center. OTC is launching a new initiative. If you would like to see more articles like these, sign up for our free newsletter here.

On the Commons is starting a new project to help communities boost their sense of common connections and possibilities. For more information, contact Jay Walljasper.

Credits

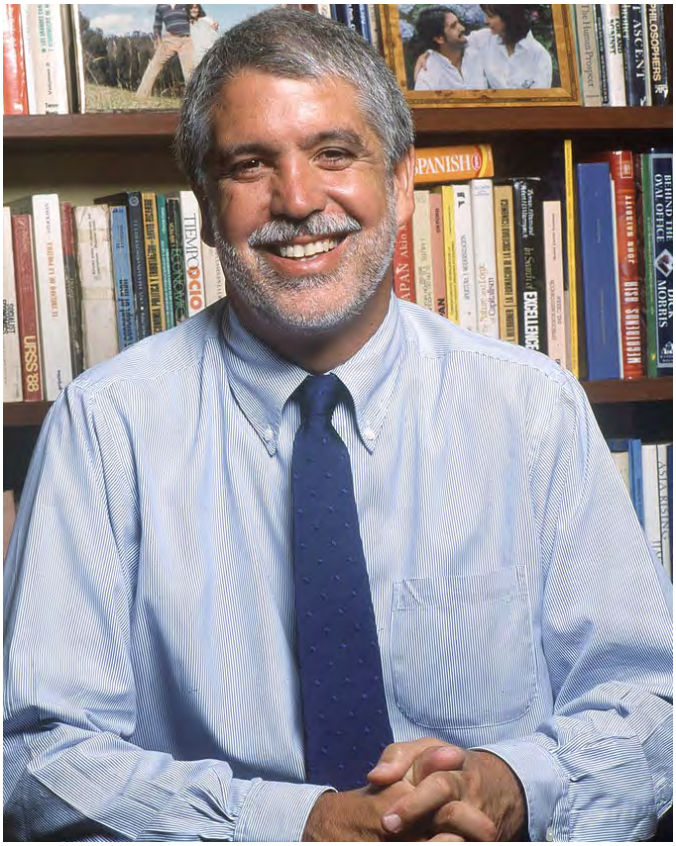
All of the stories here were excerpted from *Commons Magazine*, except "What Is Placemaking?" which is excerpted from the website of Project for Public Spaces, and "The World's Sexiest Cities," which is adapted from *Shareable* magazine. All stories are published under a Creative Commons (CC) license, and can be reprinted with attribution to *OntheCommons.org* or another original source cited (and a link to the OTC homepage or other sources' homepage).

Some of this work appeared in different forms in *All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons* (The New Press), *The Great Neighborhood Book* (New Society Publishers), *Ode* magazine (now the *Intelligent Optimist*) *Shareable* magazine, *The Nation*, *Notre Dame* magazine, *Yes!* magazine, *Model D*, and *Making Places* (the PPS newsletter).

Matthew Foster is the designer of this project.

How to Design Our Cities for Happiness

A Latin American mayor seeks to improve daily life for everyone



Enrigue Penalosa believes all cities should offer "quality of life equality." (*Photo by the International Transport Forum.*)

Happiness itself is a commons to which everyone should have equal access.

That's the view of Enrique Peñalosa, who is not a starry-eyed idealist given to abstract theorizing. He's actually a politician, who served as mayor of Bogotá, Colombia, and now travels the world spreading a message about how to improve quality-of-life for everyone living in today's cities.

Peñalosa's ideas stand as a beacon of hope not just for cities of the developing world, which even with their poverty and problems will absorb much of the world's population growth over the next half-century, but for cities everywhere.

Peñalosa uses phrases like "quality of life" or "social justice" rather than "commons-based society" to describe his agenda of offering poor people first-rate government services and pleasant public places, yet it is hard to think of anyone who has done more to reinvigorate the commons in his or her own community.

Peñalosa's Administration accomplished the following:

- Led a team that created the TransMilenio, a bus rapid transit system (BRT), which now carries a half-million passengers daily on special bus lanes that offer most of the advantages of a subway at a fraction of the cost.

- Built 52 new schools, refurbished 150 others, and increased student enrollment by 34 percent.
- Established or improved 1,200 parks and playgrounds throughout the city.
- Built three central and ten neighborhood libraries.
- Improved life in the slums by providing water service to 100 percent of Bogotá households.
- Established 300 kilometers of protected bikeways, the largest network in the developing world.
- Created the world's longest pedestrian street, 17 kilometers (10.5 miles) crossing much of the city as well as a 45 kilometer (28 miles) greenway along a path that had been originally slated for an eight-lane highway.
- Reduced traffic by almost 40 percent by implementing a system where motorists must leave cars at home during rush hour two days a week.
- Planted 100,000 trees.

Peñalosa is passionate in articulating a vision that a city belongs to all its citizens.

Of course Peñalosa didn't do this alone. Antanas Mockus, who both preceded and succeeded him as mayor, and Gil Peñalosa (now director of 8–80 Cities), Enrique's brother, who served as parks commissioner under Mockus, are among the many who deserve credit.

"My focus has always been social—how you can help the most people for the greater public good," Peñalosa says.

"We live in the post-communism period, in which many have assumed equality as a social goal is obsolete," he explains. "Although income equality as a concept does not jive with the market economy, we can seek to achieve quality-of-life equality."

He is firmly dedicated to giving everyone in the city more opportunity for recreation, education, transportation, and the chance to take pleasure in their surroundings.

Peñalosa is proud of how his administration reined in the automobile in Bogotá in order to meet the needs of those who do not own cars. Nearly all cities around the globe accommodate motorists at the expense of everyone else using the streets—which are a commons once used by everyone. In the developing world, where only a select portion of people own motor vehicles, this is particularly unfair and detrimental to a sense of community.

"I was almost impeached by the car-owning upper classes," Peñalosa recalls, "but it was popular with everyone else."

Another public space innovation from Bogotá that has spread around the world is the Ciclovía, in which as many as two million people (30 percent of the city's population) take over more than 100 kilometers of major streets every Sunday, for bike rides, strolls and public events. This weekly event began in 1976 but was expanded by Peñalosa. It now has spread to numerous North American cities, where it is called open streets.

It's not that Peñalosa hates cars. It's that he loves lively places where people of all backgrounds gather to enjoy themselves—public commons that barely exist in cities where cars rule the streets.

Peñalosa has taken this message throughout the world in lecture tours sponsored by the World Bank and the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), a New York-based group promoting sustainable transportation in the developing world.

"You cannot overestimate the impact Peñalosa has had, on a personal level, in 10 or 12 countries," notes Walter Hook, director of ITDP. "He takes these ideas, which can be rather dry, and speaks emotionally

about the ways they affect people's lives. He has the ability to change how people think about cities. He's a revolutionary that way."

"The least a democratic society should do," Peñalosa declares, "is to offer people wonderful public spaces. Public spaces are not a frivolity. They are just as important as hospitals and schools. They create a sense of belonging."

—JAY WALLJASPER

Poor People Need Public Places the Most

Parks, squares, libraries, transit, schools and community centers are used by everyone

A fun day at Ramona Park in Long Beach, California. *(Photo by Dan Boarder under a CC license.)*

It's easy to dismiss rising interest in public spaces as something that only the wealthy can afford to worry about. But take a look at any bustling place anywhere in the world—from the markets of Africa and Asia to the squares of Latin America to the street corners of Europe and North America—and you'll find it's low-income people who depend on public spaces the most.

Enrique Peñalosa—former mayor of Bogotá, Colombia—notes that rich people enjoy the pleasures of big homes, backyards, private clubs, and country houses. Poor people have only their local street to hang out in—and if they're lucky, a park, library, or playground nearby. He made public spaces the centerpiece of his administration (see "How to Design Our Cities for Happiness"). Since leaving office he has become a globe-trotting ambassador helping out cities from Jakarta (Indonesia) to Dakar (Senegal) improve life for their citizens.

"Public spaces create a different type of society," he asserts. "A society where people of all income levels meet in public spaces is a more integrated, socially healthier one."

The proliferation of autos, and the low social rank afforded anyone who doesn't drive is an issue all across the developing world, notes Lisa Peterson, formerly with the New York-based Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP). "Cars are seen as status for people. Big, fast roads are seen as status for cities. That is still the idea of progress in many places."

Peterson sees a number of signs in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that people are realizing it's a mistake to pursue the same kind of auto-dominated development that has created environmental problems and eroded the vitality of public life in the West. The World Bank has backed off from its auto-oriented development guidelines, while cities like Bogotá and Dar es Salaam in Tanzania provide new models of urban development with an emphasis on transit and bicycles. A number of places are also creating pedestrian districts.

"People in the U.S. now recognize there are problems with building cities for cars and not for people," Enrique Penalosa says, "and we in the Third World need to know that."

—JAY WALLJASPER

How to Design Our Neighborhoods for Happiness

Common spaces bring us together

Neighbors in Conover Commons in Redmond, Washington share an open field as their community gathering spot.

Biology is destiny, declared Sigmund Freud.

But if Freud were around today, he might say “design is destiny”—especially after taking a stroll through most modern cities.

The way we design our communities plays a huge role in how we experience our lives. Neighborhoods built without sidewalks, for instance, mean that people walk less and therefore enjoy fewer spontaneous encounters, which is what instills a spirit of community to a place. A neighborly sense of the commons is missing.

You don't have to be a therapist to realize that this creates lasting psychological effects. It thwarts the connections between people that encourage us to congregate, cooperate, and work for the common good. We retreat into ever more privatized existences.

Of course, this is no startling revelation. Over the past 40 years, the shrinking sense of community across America has been widely discussed, and many proposals outlined about how to bring us back together.

One of the notable solutions being put into practice to combat this problem is New Urbanism, an architectural movement to build new communities (and revitalize existing ones) by maximizing opportunities for social exchange: public plazas, front porches, corner stores, coffee shops, neighborhood schools, narrow streets, and, yes, sidewalks.

But while New Urbanism is making strides at the level of the neighborhood, we still spend most of our time at home, which today means seeing no one other than our nuclear family. How could we widen that circle just a bit? Cooperative living and cohousing communities are gaining popularity, especially among young people. Yet, millions more people are looking for more informal arrangements with neighbors, where they share more than a property line.

That's an idea Seattle-area architect Ross Chapin has explored for many years, and now showcases in an inspiring book: *Pocket Neighborhoods: Creating a Small-Scale Community in a Large-Scale World*.

He believes that groupings of four to twelve households make an ideal community "where meaningful 'neighborly' relationships are fostered." But even here, design shapes our destiny. Chapin explains that strong connections between neighbors develop most fully and organically when everyone shares some "common ground."

That can be a semi-public space, as in the pocket neighborhoods Chapin designs in the Seattle area. In the book's bright photographs, they look like grassy patches of paradise, where kids scamper, flowers bloom, and neighbors stop to chat.

But Chapin points out these commons can take many different forms—an apartment building in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a shared backyard; a group of neighbors in Oakland who tore down their backyard fences to create a commons; a block in Baltimore that turned their alley into a public commons; or the residential pedestrian streets found in Manhattan Beach, California, and all around Europe.

The benefits of a living in such a community go farther than you might imagine. I lived in one while in graduate school, a rundown 1886 row house with a common courtyard near the University of Minnesota campus. At no other time in my life have I become such close friends with my neighbors. We shared impromptu afternoon conversations at the picnic table and parties that went into the early hours of the morning under Italian lights we strung from the trees.

When the property was sold to a speculator who jacked up the rents to raise capital for the eventual demolition of the building, we organized a rent strike. And we won, which would never have happened if we had not already forged strong bonds with each other. Because the judge ruled that the landlord could not raise our rents until he fixed up the building, he abandoned plans to knock it down. It still stands today, and I still remain in contact with some of the old gang that partied in the courtyard.

—JAY WALLJASPER

25 Tips to Make Your Community Better

Jay Walljasper's guide to changing the world on your own block

Everyone can pitch in to improve the neighborhood. *(Photo by MetalRiot under a CC license.)*

1. Give people a place to hangout
2. Give people something to see
3. Give people something to do
4. Give people a place to sit down
5. Give people a safe, comfortable place to walk
6. Give people a safe, comfortable place to bike
7. Give people reliable, comfortable public transportation
8. Make the streets safe
9. Make sure the streets are safe—not just from crime but from traffic
10. Remember the streets belong to everyone—not just motorists
11. Don't forget about the needs of older neighbors
12. Don't forget about the needs of kids
13. Let your community go to the dogs
14. Reclaim front yards as social spaces
15. Remember the best neighborhoods, even in big cities, feel like villages
16. Plan for winter weather as well as sunny, warm days
17. Don't fear density—people enjoy being around other people

18. Don’t give up hope—great changes are possible when neighbors get together
19. Build on what’s good in your community to make things even better
20. Remember the power of the commons: people working together for the benefit of everyone
21. Never underestimate the power of a shared meal to move people into action
22. Start with small steps—like planting flowers
23. Become a community booster, watchdog, patriot
24. Learn from other neighborhoods in your town and around the world
25. Take the time to have fun and enjoy what’s already great about your neighborhood

—JAY WALLJASPER

Adapted from a presentation that Jay Walljasper, Senior Fellow at on On The Commons, presents to neighborhood, civic, business, and professional groups around the country. For more information, contact Jay@JayWalljasper.com or see JayWalljasper.com.

Small is Powerful

The rebirth of Dudley Street shows what happens when neighbors come together

Residents forged a new vision for a low-income Boston neighborhood. *(Photo by Office of Governor Patrick under a CC license.)*

The neighborhood is the basic building block of human society, and successful efforts to make the world a better place usually start right there.

Neighborhoods—whether in cities, suburbs, or small towns—are the level of social organization at which people interact most regularly and naturally, providing a ready-made forum for tackling serious issues together. Even if the neighbors abhor our political views or artistic tastes, we nonetheless share a bond. When a crisis occurs (a rash of burglaries) or opportunities arise (plans to revitalize the park), these are the people who stand beside us to make improvements for the future.

In an era when what's wrong in the world can seem complicated and daunting, neighborhoods offer hope that we can still make a difference. What's overwhelming at the international, national, or even municipal level often can be fixed closer to home, without large sums of money or political connections. And in an era of instantaneous global communications, no great idea stays in one place for long.

The Dudley Street neighborhood in Boston was once dogged by all the usual urban ills: poverty, crime, drugs, unemployment, racial discrimination, inadequate public services, deteriorating housing, and poor schools. These problems—inextricably linked with global economics and national policies—felt insurmountable.

But the residents of Dudley Street, assisted by a small grant from a local foundation, forged a vision for their future and went to work. Organized under the banner of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, they created a town common, built a community center, started youth programs, launched a farmers market, and promoted locally owned businesses. These efforts sparked a new sense of possibility for the community and brought genuine improvements to the lives of Dudley Street residents.

This all goes to show, when you get together with the neighbors, almost anything is possible. That's because the people who live in a particular locale are the experts on that place, with the wisdom and commitment to get things done.

—JAY WALLJASPER

Restore the Commons in Your Own Front Yard

How a public bench transformed a suburban neighborhood

By adding a bench to his front yard, Dave Marcucci boosted the spirit of his community. *(Photo by Dave Marcucci.)*

It's not hard to start a commons revival in your neighborhood. In fact, as Dave Marcucci discovered, a simple bench can do the trick. After attending a Project for Public Spaces training course in 2005, Marcucci came away inspired by the idea that every neighborhood needed places for people to gather. He returned home to Mississauga, Ontario determined to make his house, which occupies a prime corner lot, a great place within his neighborhood.

Marcucci started by tearing out the fencing at the corner of his front yard. As he got to work landscaping the area and constructing a bench, he received a lot of quizzical comments. "Why don't you build a bench for yourself in the backyard?" He would answer, "the bench is for you."

When the bench was finished, Marcucci and a few neighbors threw a street party. The bench soon became a place where everyone in the neighborhood came to sit. Older people stop to rest on it during their evening strolls. Kids sit there as they wait for the school bus in the morning. Families out for a walk use it to take a breather.

The complications that Marcucci first anticipated have not come to pass. The bench has not been vandalized, nor has it attracted negative uses. It was installed without approval from the city, but no one has demanded to see a permit. "Its worked out really well," he explains. "I've met my neighbors, and other people I'd never met before. It's added a really friendly atmosphere to the neighborhood." Indeed, a few months later, a homeowner around the corner built his own bench for the whole neighborhood to use.

—BEN FRIED

Ben Fried is editor in chief of Streetsblog. Adapted from The Great Neighborhood Book: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Placemaking *(New Society Publishers).*

How Dutch Neighbors Improved Life Around the World

Traffic calming reminds us the streets belong to everyone

Neighbors in Berkeley made their street safer by pushing for traffic calming measures that help motorists drive the speed limit. *(Photo by Walk Eagle Rock under a CC license.)*

Traffic calming is based on the rather simple idea that cars and trucks don't have exclusive ownership of our streets. Streets are shared commons that also belong to people on foot and bicycles, in baby strollers and wheelchairs.

Traffic calming reminds motorists of this fact, using design features such as narrowing roads, adding speed bumps, or elevating crosswalks to slow traffic and highlight pedestrians' right to cross the street.

This idea has altered the literal landscape of urban life in Europe, North America, and the rest of the world as millions of people now move about their communities with more ease and pleasure.

The origins of this ingenious idea trace back to Delft, Netherlands, where residents of one block were fed up with cars racing along their street, endangering children, pets, and peace of mind. One evening they decided to do something about it by dragging old couches, coffee tables, and other objects out into the roadway and positioning them in such a way that cars could pass but would have to slow down. Police soon arrived on the scene and had to admit that this project, while clearly illegal, was a really good idea. Soon, the city itself was installing similar measures called *woonerfs* (Dutch for "living yards") on streets plagued by unruly motorists.

—JAY WALLJASPER

Adapted from The Great Neighborhood Book: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Placemaking *(New Society Publishers)*

Every Block Needs a Piazza

D-I-Y placemaking transforms communities coast to coast

Something as simple as painting an intersection can transform people's sense of possibility. *(Photo by Sara Dent under a CC license.)*

Mark Lakeman is an architect fired up by the belief that our neighborhoods can become more than places where we hang our hats and park our cars.

Taking a break from his practice a few years back, he traveled through Central America and Italy, falling in love with the piazzas, plazas, and zocalos where everyone gathers to talk, play, and hang out together. Although most of these people are poor by our standards, he notes, they enjoy a richness of life missing in most North American communities.

Lakeman came home to Portland with the idea of creating a similar commons in his own neighborhood. He discovered that several neighbors were thinking along the same lines, so they rolled up their sleeves and transformed an intersection on Sherritt Street into a Pacific Northwest version of a piazza, painting a colorful mural on the pavement that sent a clear message to passing motorists this was not your ordinary corner. Next, they constructed a tea cart to lure folks out into the street for some convivial fun. As social activity began to move out into the street, drivers and pedestrians instinctively learned to share the space, thus its name Share-It Square.

They called their work "intersection repair."

But what did the neighbors think? Challenging the dominance of automobiles on American streets is a brazen act, especially to older people who came of age in the car-crazy 1950s. Lakeman worried about angry opposition arising to quash the experiment, until talking to Brian Shaw, who lived right at the corner.

"Brian said that his father had fought in Italy during World War II, and would tell stories about how when they liberated a village, everyone would automatically gather in the piazzas to celebrate," Lakeman recalls. "He said his dad always used to sing an Italian song with lyrics saying, 'if you don't hear voices in the piazza when you wake up in the morning, then you know something is wrong.'"

"Something is wrong with too many places in America today," Lakeman adds.

The project elevated the sense of community in the area. Even on the quiet Monday morning when I visited, the square was a lively hive of activity with people chatting on the sidewalk and relaxing in the benches.

People in other neighborhoods wanted to do something similar and a loosely structured organization, City Repair, sprang up to help them. Their motto: Every Neighborhood Needs a Piazza. Every year City Repair sponsors a Village Building Convergence, in which crews of volunteers transform lowly intersections, sidewalks, schoolyards, and other public spaces into lively commons where the community can gather.

This experience not only transformed Lakeman's neighborhood, but also his life. Drawing on his experience with Share-It Square and City Repair, he now speaks around the country about how to create neighborhood commons and founded the architectural and planning firm Communitecture to "design beautiful and sustainable places that bring people together in community." And people around the U.S. have used intersection repair to enliven their communities.

—JAY WALLJASPER

Make Paradise Out of a Parking Lot

Reclaiming the streets for people

A sidewalk cafe sprouts in a spot once reserved for cars. *(Photo by SF Planning under a CC license.)*

"Everyone talks about the weather but no one does anything about it," Mark Twain once quipped.

And the same could be said about the lack of public space in most cities, where the majority of non-private property is taken up by highways, streets, and parking spaces.

In downtown San Francisco, for instance, cars claim 70 percent of public space, which is what finally prodded a gang of artists to stop complaining and start doing something.

One fine day in 2005, they plugged the meters at a few downtown parking spaces, rolled out 200 feet of sod, set up chairs, and sat down to enjoy San Francisco's newest "park". (And somewhere Samuel Clemens, who started signing his articles "Mark Twain" while working in San Francisco, was smiling.)

Most folks appreciated the happy scene of people lounging in a spot usually reserved for Buicks and Hyundai, but a few objected. To which the artists—who were associated with Rebar, a group working "at the intersection of art, design and activism"—politely pointed out that if drivers could claim the space by plugging the meter, why couldn't people without cars.

That was the first Park(ing) Day, which is now celebrated in more than 100 cities in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Europe, and North America. Plan your own festivities for September 20th this year.

Meanwhile back in San Francisco, some of these "parklets" are becoming permanent as part of the city's Pavement to Parks program—an innovative plan to return some of the streets back to the people.

—JAY WALLJASPER

Build on What's Good to Make Things Better in Struggling Communities

Capitalizing on your assets is as important as tackling problems

Many people in Chicago's Grand Boulevard neighborhood found hope through community projects. *(Photo by Zo187under a CC license.)*

The biggest problem in many communities—especially low-income ones— is caused by perception more than reality. A part of town gets the reputation for being "tough," or "declining," which is constantly reinforced in the media and local gossip. A negative incident happening there is widely reported as more evidence of "social breakdown," whereas the same thing occurring in another place would be thought of as "an unfortunate event" and quickly forgotten.

Making things worse, many well-intentioned efforts to help these afflicted areas wind up stigmatizing the community even more. The whole focus is on everything that's wrong: bad schools, bad crime, bad housing, bad gangs, bad economic opportunities. Even the people who live there come to feel negative about where they live and helpless to do anything to change things. It's all just bad.

Yet even in the most economically and socially challenged communities, there are a lot of good things going on—shared dreams, community assets, and ways that people come together. These are the building blocks to make things better.

On paper, things looked bleak for the Grand Boulevard neighborhood in Chicago in the early '90s. Eighty percent of children there lived in poverty, and a third of adults were unemployed. Yet below the surface, not visible in government statistics or a quick drive down its rundown streets, there was reason for hope. This largely African-American community of 36,000 on the city's South Side was home to no less than 320 citizens groups working to improve life in the neighborhood.

Grand Boulevard's residents were not just hapless victims waiting for someone from the outside to rescue them; they were taking matters into their own hands. These community groups—which ranged from church committees to senior citizen centers to mothers' support groups—were mostly involved in the basic caretaking such as providing support for single mothers or taking in children whose parents were in prison.

Eventually many of these groups organized themselves into the Grand Boulevard Federation, which started addressing more complex issues such as creating jobs in the neighborhood and improving social services. They formed partnerships with government agencies, non-profit organizations and businesses, such as United Parcel Service, which reserved 50 part-time jobs for Grand Boulevard residents needing to get back on their feet. This made a difference in Grand Boulevard—both in concrete economic and social measures, but also the community's own faith that they can solve their problems.

"For the last 40 or 50 years we have been looking at communities in terms of their needs," says Jody Kretzmann, co-director of the Asset Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University. "We have run into a brick wall with that approach." Kretzmann and his colleague John McKnight of Northwestern pioneered a new approach to urban problems that starts with looking at the assets that exist in a community, rather than just looking at what's wrong. This empowers people, Kretzmann says, drawing on the abilities and insight of local residents to solve a neighborhood's own problems. This does not mean, he is careful to note, that troubled neighborhoods don't need outside help.

Kretzmann suggests all local revitalization projects begin with an assets inventory—which can be as simple as a list of what's good about the neighborhood. Solicit the opinions of everyone, including youngsters and senior citizens, when compiling your list.

Jim Diers, a veteran activist who has held workshops throughout Seattle to help residents improve their neighborhoods, says, "The assets a neighborhood can build on range from natural features to a school playground, great stores, networks, organizations, artists, and the whole range of human and financial resources, energy, creativity, and ideas. Whether it's a restaurant with especially delicious food, a gigantic cedar tree, or a longtime resident, a neighborhood treasure is something that makes us glad we live where we do."

—JAY WALLJASPER

Adapted from The Great Neighborhood Book: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Placemaking *(New Society Publishers)*

The Promise and Limits of Community Volunteers

4 ways government can spark a self-help revolution

Shorter work hours and higher wages would allow more of us to volunteer in our communities. (*Photo by nyealumniadvisor under a CC license.*)

Politicians and activists devoted to deep slashes in government spending have an easy answer when asked what happens to people whose lives and livelihoods depend on public programs. They point to volunteerism—the tradition of people taking care of each other, which has sustained human civilization for millennia.

It's an attractive idea, which evokes the spirit of the commons. Volunteers working largely outside the realm of government—neighborhood organizations, local fire brigades, blood banks, and other civic initiatives—are obvious examples of commons-based sharing and caring.

Theoretically you could picture a society based upon strong incentives for everyday citizens to provide the services now provided by federal, state, and local governments—everything from police protection to the Public Health Service. To actually create such a society, however, would mean some sweeping changes to current economic and social policies.

To truly encourage widespread volunteerism, we'd need to make sure that everyone (not just the well-to-do) have the time to do it. Most people today working longer hours for less pay are frantic just to get through the day. Finding extra time in their crunched schedules to manage upkeep at the local park or take care of elderly neighbors looks impossible.

Here are four ways we could create a strong society based on America's great tradition of volunteerism.

- Dramatically expanded vacation time and family-leave benefits, and the institution of a four-day workweek—along with stringent enforcement of overtime provisions for all people working more than 40 hours a week.

- A return to the days of the family wage—the period before the 1970s when a middle-class household could get by on one worker's wages. And unlike those days, minorities and low-wage workers would not be excluded from this social contract. Since we live in a different era now, it's likely that many couples today would elect to both work half time. But any way you want to do it, this would trigger a volcanic eruption of volunteers.

- A universal national health care system that goes beyond the insurance reforms of Obamacare.

- Most important of all would be a major boost in the minimum wage so that Americans at all rungs of the social ladder would not need to devote all their time and energy to paid work.

These kind of pro-volunteer, pro-commons policies also depend on government playing an important role: Enforcing vacation, family leave, work hours and minimum wage laws, as well as making sure everyone receives adequate health care coverage. Volunteers will not magically appear without positive measures to ensure that all people have time for the common good.

—JAY WALLJASPER

What Difference Can the Commons Make in One Town?

On the Commons works with citizens in Winona, Minnesota

A historic downtown and high levels of civic involvement are key assets for this city of 27,000. *(Photo by J. Stephen Conn under a CC license.)*

As part of On the Commons' efforts to strengthen commons connections and reinvigorate public life, I was invited to Winona, Minnesota—a city of 27,000 on the Mississippi River 135 miles south of Minneapolis. During a two-day residency sponsored by Winona State University, I met with the newly elected mayor, a city council member, the director of parks and recreation, business owners, citizen leaders, university students, and faculty and staff. I also spoke to four classes, did media interviews, and gave a public talk.

Additionally, in two wide-ranging discussions at the Blue Heron Coffee shop—a hive of activity from morning to night with an attached bookstore, The Book Shelf—we explored the value of commons-based approaches to issues as varied as transforming an underused riverfront park, reducing tensions between student renters and homeowners, providing a secure economic base for all citizens, and promoting the area as a cultural and outdoor recreation destination.

A theme coming up in all these conversations was that when you recognize some things belong to everyone—including generations to come—it inspires and empowers you to find new possibilities that benefit the community as a whole. In short, the commons is not just an interesting idea, but it is also a practical approach that can be applied in solving immediate problems.

This approach builds on a legacy of the common good in Winona, which inhabits a picturesque setting between a riverfront dotted with wild islands and high bluffs rising to the west. Much of this land is in public hands thanks in part to John A. Latsch, a successful local grocer who bought up scenery he loved in the early 20th Century and bestowed it to the community.

Walking through Winona, I noticed many thriving examples of the commons. Venerable brick buildings downtown hosted numerous coffee shops and taverns, which bring people together. The Mississippi River and the towering bluffs are both powerful presences that define the city.

On the opposite side of town away from the river, a large city park dominated by Lake Winona offers five miles of lakeside trails, a band shell, recreational opportunities, and an artist-created water fountain. Winona State University's 9,000 students enjoy a scenic, pedestrian-friendly campus thanks to a visionary plan that closed a number of streets to motor vehicles.

Apart from these physical commons, Winona claims a bounty of social commons much larger than you might expect in a city this size. By sheer good luck, I came to town at the very same time as a citywide celebration of Rockwell Kent—an American artist I love for his prints of wilderness scenes, rural people, and mythological tales. Kent lived in Winona in 1912 and 1913 working as an architectural contractor.

The festival was a collaboration of many organizations, with events at the impressive Winona County History Center and the much trafficked Winona Public Library (in the same room where Kent mounted one of his first art shows), and his work was also on display at galleries at Winona State and Saint Mary's University, as well as the Minnesota Marine Art Museum (which also features work by Monet, Van Gogh, Matisse Renoir, Picasso, Cezanne, and Winslow Homer). A symposium on Kent was held at Winona State and an original play about his time in Minnesota staged at the local Theatre du Mississippi. And that's not all when it comes to culture: The city also sports celebrated Shakespeare and Beethoven Festivals in the summertime.

Taken together, these commons assets add up to solid community wealth, which if recognized by Winona residents as something they own together will form the basis for tackling problems and seizing opportunities in the years to come.

—JAY WALLJASPER

How One Small Town Lives the Commons

An interview with Elizabeth Barnet, director of the West Marin Commons

In 2006, a group of folks living around the small town of Point Reyes Station, California came together to establish, preserve, and enhance community and natural spaces in the semi-rural western region of Marin County. After a series of discussions in which the idea of the commons came up, an organization called West Marin Commons emerged with the broader mission of creating social infrastructure for resource sharing, conservation, and learning.

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Elizabeth Barnet, the director of West Marin Commons. Here she explains the organization's founding story, its current work and shares how her passion for community work led her to collaborate with the late Jonathan Rowe, an author, activist, and co-founder of On the Commons.

— Jessica Conrad

Local families help dig, plant, water, and weed the Native Plant Garden in Point Reyes Station. *(Photo courtesy of West Marin Commons.)*

What led you to work with West Marin Commons?

In 2006, my kids and I became involved in a cleanup project with the Tomales Bay Watershed Council on the lower end of Tomales Bay. I was homeschooling them at the time, and I always emphasized learning about the place where we lived. Seeing the value of this to the small group of children I worked with, I began to seek ways to make similar experiences available to the broader community. I discovered a fledgling website for the Tomales Bay Institute (which became On the Commons when it moved to Minneapolis). It was my first introduction to the word "commons," and it resonated with me right away. I contacted Jonathan Rowe, who was the director, and we met regularly.

A commons survey was proposed on the Tomales Bay Institute website. We used this survey approach to evaluate and measure the layout of our town and to consider our roles and the meaning of commons. These exercises were empowering for the kids, and they helped us all discover Point Reyes Station as our place—something we share and take care of together.

Has the idea of the commons caught on in your community?

I've been impressed by how many people in town use the word "commons" more and more. But I find that the commons is misinterpreted when people assume that it is "free" for the taking and not necessarily for the giving. I always try to emphasize the reciprocal aspect of a commons—that our ownership implies we are responsible for protecting and promoting the things we share.

Learning how to navigate these challenges is what West Marin Commons is all about. Here in the U.S. we don't necessarily develop habits that lead us toward shared decision-making and ownership. I believe education is key for helping people understand the commons approach—and that's something we can provide at West Marin Commons.

Has the commons approach helped address a community challenge?

Yes, I can think of a number of ways the commons approach has helped the community. Transportation is a good example. We live in a rural place, and we have to do a lot of driving both in town and "over the hill" where people go shopping, see the doctor, many kinds of things. We created a rideshare program called the Over-the-Hill-Gang (which has nothing to do with age, but refers to the fact that you have to drive over an actual hill to get out of town). There's no insurance, no formality. The forum is just a place for people to connect.

What has been easy or challenging about creating these solutions?

Solutions are needed, and the best thing is that people are both open to new ideas and hungry for inspiration. That makes commons work easy.

What makes it hard is getting clear on assumptions. What really is the commons? And how do we intentionally protect and promote it?

What are you working on now at West Marin Commons?

We have three areas that we're focused on now: Commons Spaces, Commons Celebration, and Commons Connect.

Commons Spaces has to do with the town commons lot, the native garden, and the gathering places and pathways in West Marin. We need places where everyone is welcome—every community does.

Commons Celebration is all about celebrating the commons through seasonal, celebratory events, including apple pressing events and barn dances. I love apple pressing because it's about bounty: We simply have too many apples. It's nice when you have too much of a commons—especially a physical commons. We have lots of varieties of apples here, and kids love making different flavored apple juices. But beyond the fun, these events have become opportunities for the community to gather.

Commons Connect, our website that includes our forums, is a virtual gathering place. We try to provide the infrastructure for self-help. Those who live here use our local forums, such as West Marin Share, where people post a personal need or offering, or they might post a need on behalf of the preschool or senior living facility. Maybe they're looking for a desk or bookshelf or lost cat or food for a sick neighbor or the name of a good podiatrist. The website also serves visitors via a calendar and other features. It's a place where newcomers can start to get connected. There are countless examples. It's an online gathering place for West Marin.

Another of our central efforts is to provide a nexus including a calendar, a listing of local media and blogs, and a directory. We are also starting to profile happenings and projects in West Marin that wouldn't get such multi-media coverage otherwise.

—INTERVIEW BY JESSICA CONRAD

Jessica Conrad is the Content and Community Manager at On The Commons.

The Best Neighborhood in North America

Welcome to Jacobsburg, which offers many lessons for other communities to follow

A strong sense of neighborliness makes Jacobsburg a happy place to live and work. *(Photo courtesy of Project for Public Spaces.)*

It's no coincidence that the words "commons" and "community" spring from the same linguistic ancestor—which some researchers trace back beyond Latin and Greek to "kommein," a word that in Indo-European languages means "shared by all."

Several years ago I wrote the *Great Neighborhood Book* (together with Project Public Spaces) to offer fresh ideas about how to increase conviviality in our lives and strengthen valuable social bonds with neighbors. Since then almost everyone I meet asks: What's your favorite neighborhood?

To settle the matter once and for all, I wrote up a list of all the wonderful neighborhoods I've had the pleasure of visiting. Then, with great deliberation, I began to cross off names until only Jacobsburg remained. It is, in my opinion, the Great North American American Neighborhood. To keep the suspense going, I will let you figure out the city where Jacobsburg is located. But here are the things I love about it.

Jacobsburg grew up slowly in a variety of architectural styles between 1890, when streetcars first reached this wooded spot along the river, and 1920, when the boom in automobile sales opened up distant suburban tracts for development. Buses now ply streets where rails once ran, but the corner business districts that popped up to serve trolley riders are still the heart of the community. Butcher shops and haberdasheries, however, have now given way to ethnic eateries and vintage clothing shops.

One of the traits I most admire about Jacobsburg is a knack for being old-fashioned and cosmopolitan at the same time. At one of my favorite street corners in the world, 19th St. and Holly Avenue, a delicatessen run by an old guy named Dom looks out across the intersection at Krazy Kat Komics, a used and rare comic book store. Within a few steps you'll come across a Reconstructionist synagogue, the largest fan belt dealer in the state, a Caribbean seafood restaurant once written up in *Food + Wine* magazine, and a laundromat made famous in an R&B song.

What do I like most about Jacobsburg? Well, I could mention plentiful trees shading the sidewalks or the pleasing sequence of three-and four-story buildings with front stoops where people sit out to socialize on warm evenings. Then there's Riverwood park (which everyone says was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, but wasn't) with a swan pond, skateboard ramps, a weekend farmers market, summer band concerts, and a café with better pastry than you'll find in Copenhagen.

And how could I ignore the invincible spirit of neighborliness, apparent even to a casual visitor? Current residents explain that the neighborhood set aside its own ethnic tensions in the 1970s and came together to fight a freeway that would have essentially leveled the place. That sense of civic engagement endures to this day. The local business association sponsors an annual Spring Festival with a 30-foot maypole in the playground of St. Stanislaus School. Meanwhile a VFW Post, a commedia dell'Arte theatre troupe, a Baptist congregation, a Mexican motorcycle club, and a gay men's chorus are among the dozens of local organizations that collaborate to raise money every December for the neighborhood food shelf.

One last thing I want to mention about Jacobsburg is the wealth of great pubs, which live up to an older sense of the word—meaning "public house." Families encompassing three generations can be found in the booths at corner taverns like Rufus & Bessie's or The Lisbon Inn eating supper right alongside laborers celebrating quitting time and students commemorating the end of another day of classes. The great majority of these pubs share a virtue that English novelist George Orwell lauded as "quiet enough to talk," in a 1946 essay about his favorite London pub, The Moon Under Water.

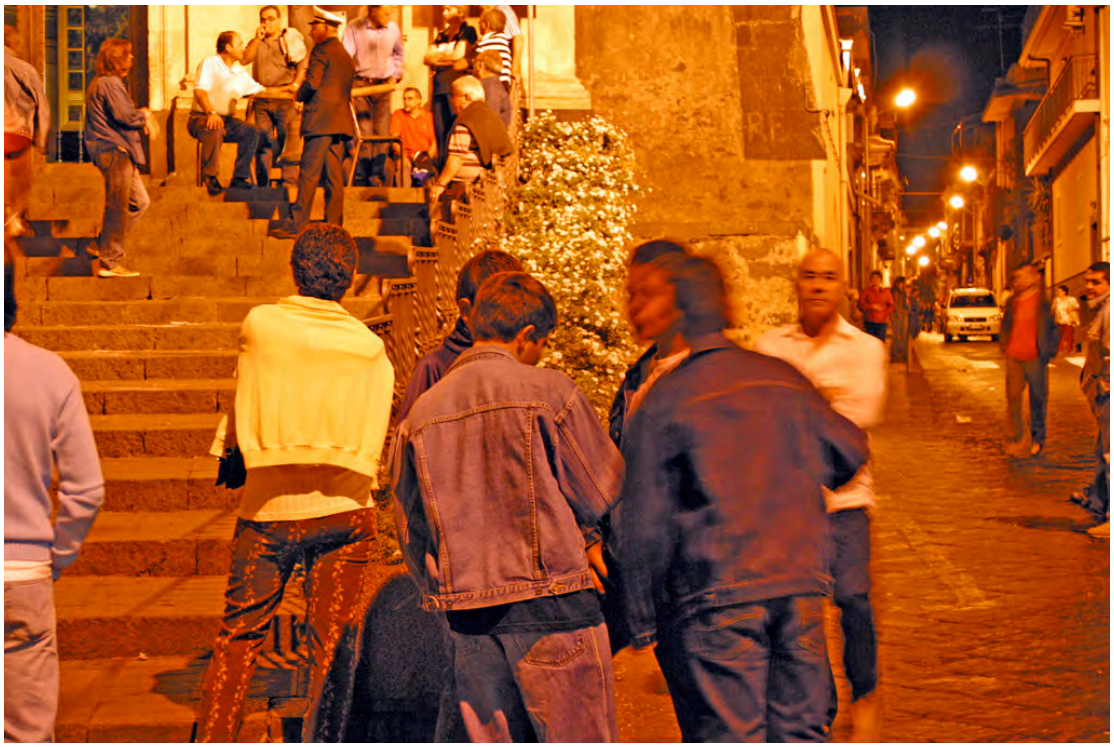
But The Moon Under the Water existed only in Orwell's imagination, a composite of the qualities he found in great pubs across England. And the same is true of Jacobsburg, a neighborhood that I dreamed up out of wonderful experiences I've had on the streets of many cities. I named it after urbanist visionary Jane Jacobs. (The photo you see here is actually Chapel Street in New Haven, Connecticut—an urban success story all on its own, where 95 percent of the area's buildings were vacant in the early 1980s.)

But rather than being uselessly Utopian, I see Jacobsburg as the future that's possible for neighborhoods everywhere as people apply the spirit of the commons to make great communities.

—JAY WALLJASPER

Walk This Way

A place to stroll is the glue that holds communities together



The evening promenade, where you meet friends and neighbors, is an age-old tradition. *(Photo by Mike Scia under a CC license.)*

We all know that walking is good for us. It sheds calories, tones muscles, and clears our minds.

But taking a regular walk also highlights that we share a common life with others— the psychic foundation of the commons. A classic example is the worldwide tradition of a stroll after dinner—the *passegiata* in Italy, the *paseo* in Latin America and Spain, the *volta* in Greece, the *spaziergang* in Germany—which honors the human instinct to see what's going on around the neighborhood.

In towns and even large cities, people amble around the same set of streets each evening. The shops are usually closed so the purpose is not shopping and errands, but to connect with their neighbors and enjoy their surroundings.

Writer Adam Goodheart described this scene near the main square of the Italian hill town of Eboli: "I realized that I kept seeing the same people, but in different combinations. Here came a blond woman pushing a stroller. Next lap, she was arm in arm with a younger woman and the stroller was nowhere to be seen. Later, they'd been joined by an old lady who was pushing the stroller. Next, they were surrounded by men, jackets draped over their shoulders..."

The words *passegiata* and *paseo* translate into English as promenade—and the idea translates too, according to Christopher Alexander, a former Berkeley Architecture professor who has devoted his life to scientifically studying what makes places work. In his classic book *A Pattern Language*, he asks, "Is the promenade in fact a purely Latin institution? Our experiments suggest that it is not...It seems that people, of all cultures, may have a general need for this kind of human mixing which the promenade makes possible."

Alexander lays out the two principles that enhance the experience and sociability of a promenade:

– The route should be approximately 1500 feet, which can easily be walked in 10 minutes at a leisurely pace. People may opt for many times around—especially teenagers on the lookout for excitement or romance—but you don't want to make the course too long for little kids or elderly people.

— It's important that there are things to see and do along the route, with no empty or dead zones of more than 150 feet. While the primary purpose of these strolls is social, people also like to have some destination: a sidewalk café, playground, bookstore, ice cream shop, etc.

Think about what routes in your neighborhood show the most promise for strolling and what improvements could be made to get people out to meet their neighbors.

Walking up and down Main Street or any lively commercial district is probably the most common North American version of the promenade, although a route along a waterfront or interesting residential blocks could work just as well. Public art, welcoming businesses, benches, flowerbeds, even a vending cart could all help solidify this area as the place to see and be seen.

—JAY WALLJASPER

Adapted from The Great Neighborhood Book: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Placemaking *(New Society Publishers).*

Why Don't We Do it in the Road?

The perplexing absence of pedestrian streets in America

Stephen Avenue in Calgary, Alberta, shows that Euro-style ped streets will work in North America, even in a sprawling city dominated by petroleum companies. *(Photo by Marco Derksen under a CC license.)*

I am bewildered by the almost complete lack of pedestrian streets in North America. Why is it that car-free commons—designed for pleasurable strolling, shopping, and socializing—which have become typical in European city centers, are almost non-existent here?

I've only seen a few—a couple of blocks in downtown Boston, Rue Prince Arthur in Montreal, Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica, and short stretches of downtown streets in college towns like Boulder, Ithaca, Iowa City, Charlottesville, and Burlington. (A glance at Wikipedia turns up a few more, although I notice many on the list are not truly car-free.)

Look what we're missing. The heart of most notable German, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, Scandinavian, and, increasingly, South American cities are bustling pedestrian zones. They stand out as favorite spots for young people to gather, lovers to linger, kids to romp, women to show off their new clothes (and discreetly admire the looks of passers-by), men to admire the looks of passers-by (and discreetly show-off their new clothes), and everybody to feel part of the wider community. This is the urban commons at its best.

Our one widespread experiment in reclaiming the streets—the downtown transit malls of the '60s and '70s—failed in most cases. That's because they were usually narrow, last-ditch measures to recessitate fading stores overwhelmed by suburban flight and new shopping malls, rather than efforts to reinvigorate the downtown as a whole. Another factor in transit malls' failure is that most were not actually pedestrian places—big buses rumbling up and down the avenue squelched the carefree, car-free ambience that fosters exuberant street life.

But I am happy to report that I discovered a genuine Euro-style ped street in the most unlikely spot: Calgary, Alberta—a sprawling city whose economy depends, ironically, on the petroleum industry. Yet right in the center of its downtown, among glass skyscrapers and traffic-choked five-lane avenues, you can happily wander five blocks down the middle of Stephen Avenue, passing sidewalk cafes and swank shops, playful public art, and bustling public spaces, unencumbered by cars or trucks during the daytime. (Local residents were no doubt glad to get back to their beloved pedestrian street after the flood waters receded this summer.)

Stephen Avenue proves: If you keep out the cars, the pedestrians will come.

The notion that cars are the Kings of the Road is a relatively new attitude. For almost all of human history, the city street functioned as a vital commons welcoming all—it's where carriages and streetcars traveled but also where youngsters played, teens flirted, dogs slept, and everyone else chatted with their friends. That all changed between the 1920s and the 1960s, depending where you lived, as motor vehicles claimed these commons for their exclusive use.

Still, I am noticing a few signs that this auto-cracy may be weakening, even in North America. The growth of traffic calming and bike lanes means that motorists are learning how to share the road. And many of us are getting a foot back in the street thanks to modest pedestrian projects being created—a block here or a half-block there in spots like Atlanta; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Rochester, Minnesota; Knoxville, Tennessee; and Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.

Don't underestimate what can arise from these small beginnings. Even a short stretch of car-free pavement empowers people on foot to realize the road belongs to them too. Jan Gehl, the influential Danish urban designer who helped create Copenhagen's pioneering pedestrian district in the 1960s, counsels people to start small and add to it bit by bit through the years.

—JAY WALLJASPER

Bicyclists Wheel into the 21st Century

Green Lanes get more people on bikes

Folks try out the new protected bike lane in Austin, Texas. The number of people on bikes increases dramatically when they are separated from rushing traffic on busy streets. *(Photo by effalar under a CC license.)*

You can glimpse the future right now in forward-looking American cities—a few blocks here or a mile there, where people riding bicycles on busy streets are protected from rushing cars and trucks. These new projects go a long way toward reclaiming North American streets as commons belonging to everyone.

Chicago's Kinzie Street, just north of downtown, offers a good picture of this transportation transformation. New bike lanes are marked with bright green paint and separated from motor traffic by a series of plastic posts. This means bicyclists glide through the busy area in the safety of their own space on the road. Pedestrians are thankful that bikes no longer seek refuge on the sidewalks, and many drivers appreciate the clear, orderly delineation about where bikes and cars belong.

"Most of all this is a safety project," notes Chicago's Transportation Commissioner Gabe Klein. "We saw bikes go up from a 22 percent share of traffic to 52 percent of traffic on the street with only a negligible change in motorists' time, but a drop in their speeds. That makes everyone safer."

Klein heralds this new style of bike lane as one way to improve urban mobility in an era of budget shortfalls. "They're dirt cheap to build compared to road projects."

People on bikes around the world feel more safe and comfortable on busy streets with a physical barrier between them and motor vehicles. In some places it's a plastic post or line of parked cars. In others it's a curb, planter, or slightly elevated bike lane. But no matter what separates people on bikes from people in cars, the results are hefty increases in the number and variety of people bicycling.

"We've seen biking almost triple on parts of 15th Street NW since installing a protected bike lane," reports Jim Sebastian, Active Transportation Project Manager for the District of Columbia. "And we're seeing different kinds of cyclists beyond the Lycra crowd. People in business suits, high heels, families out for a ride, more younger and older people."

Five years ago, these designs were barely on the horizon in the U.S., although they've been standard in Europe for decades. "Today, cities across the country are looking to green lanes to tame busy streets," says Martha Roskowski, director of the Green Lane Project, which is showcasing the potential of this 21st Century innovation in six U.S. cities: Chicago, Washington DC, San Francisco, Portland (OR), Austin, and Memphis.

"The idea is to create the kind of bike networks that will attract the 60 percent of all Americans who say they would bike more if they felt safer," says Randy Neufeld, a longtime bike advocate in Chicago who is Director of the SRAM Cycling Fund. "It's about helping people from 8 to 80 to feel safe biking on city streets."

Many cities are paying particular attention to make sure that low-income and minority communities—where many families don't own cars and others are financially strapped by the rising costs of operating one—have access to state-of-the-art biking facilities. Danny Solis—a Latino alderman representing a district on Chicago's West Side with a high percentage of Mexican-Americans, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans—says good bike lanes are important to improving public safety and economic vitality in lower-income communities. "It increases interaction between neighbors, which is a boost for businesses and keeps the gangbangers away."

Encouraging more people to ride bikes offers substantial rewards for all Americans (whether they ride a bike or not) by using streets more efficiently to move people and offering an economical choices in transportation along with addressing looming problems such as the obesity epidemic and volatile fuel prices. And it gets even better from there—the more people ride, the more benefits we'll all see.

—JAY WALLJASPER

From Swaziland to Minneapolis, Commons Offers Solutions to Low-Income People

An interview with organizer and optimist Sam Grant

From developing cooperative models in Sierra Leone and Swaziland to boosting food security in North Minneapolis, Sam Grant is creating commons-based solutions for diverse communities across the globe. Grant brings a decades-long background in economic, environmental, and social justice to his projects, as well as an unbounded sense of optimism about our ability to grow a sustainable, living culture—"one where we begin to make day-to-day decisions that increase health today and a greater sense of possibility for tomorrow."

I recently had the opportunity to talk with Grant, principal at the Movement Center for Deep Democracy about how engaging diverse cultures can lead to a better understanding of what it means to "do better" as a global community.

— Jessica Conrad

Sam Grant promotes a "commons catalyst for our common dreams." *(Photo by Jessica Conrad.)*

How does the commons influence your work today?

Through my work with American Indian communities across the U.S. and my African peers back on the continent, I've learned that people who care about our future must focus on organizing around the commons—especially those who live in the U.S.

So we recently applied the commons framework to a food lab where 175 people gathered to look at the vacant lots in North Minneapolis. The neighborhood is very poor, very marginalized, and isolated from

the mainstream economy. We discussed how to protect those vacant lots as a commons and as a means for increasing the food security of the community, thereby generating health and wealth.

I'm also working with a group of food processors that are using a community kitchen on a part-time basis. Last year they processed 7,500 pounds of food by hand. This year they made the audacious goal of securing more equipment and processing 100,000 pounds of food. Soon we think we will have 18 people forming a co-op. We're working on the final business plan now, but we think we will be able to create 30 jobs in three years and fifty jobs in five years. It's pretty exciting.

What is the greatest opportunity to strengthen and expand the commons right now?

I've recently been reading work by the democracy collaborative and Gar Alperovitz who supports not just green jobs, but also green ownership. I see a real opportunity now. It's too soon for me to say where it all might go, but I'm following and joining and facilitating: I've got young people involved in growing green spaces in the community, and along with some colleagues in Africa, I'm helping to develop cooperative infrastructure in Sierra Leone and Swaziland.

It seems a little bit unrealistic just how much is possible right now. I feel as though a lot of dreams can begin to manifest as a result of all the hard work people have put in over the last couple of decades. And once those dreams manifest over the next eight or ten years, then our consciousness will have shifted.

What are a few of the most beloved commons in your life and community?

I'm a nature boy, so one of my favorite commons is public space where I can go for a walk with my family. A coffee shop is another favorite commons. It's a private enterprise, but it's a place for community to emerge. The shop across the street from our house has a kids' area where my daughter can interact with other children. We often go to the public library, which is another outrageously useful commons. I also teach at two different public colleges, another form of commons that I highly appreciate.

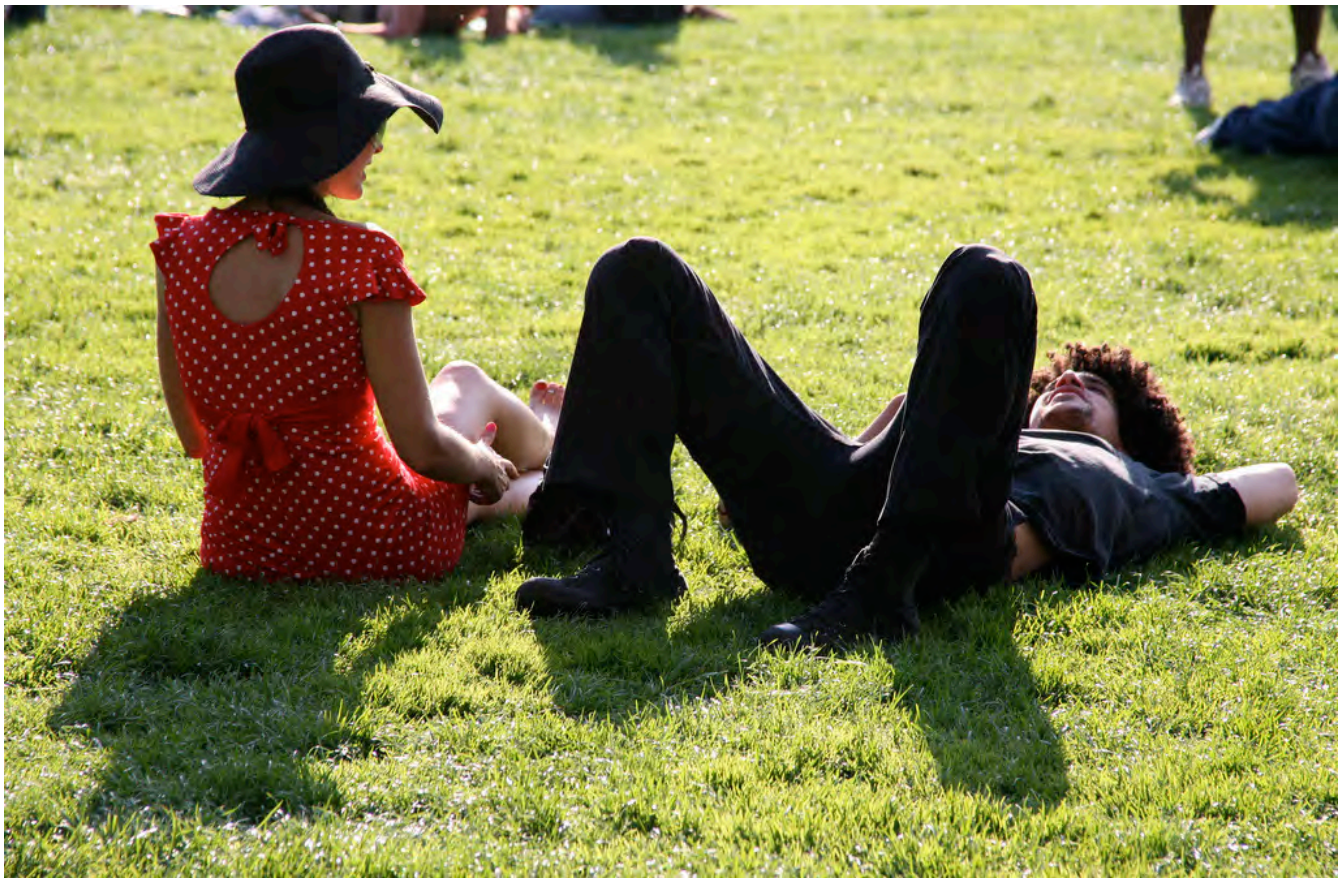
Then the big one is the common dream that humanity has, and I feel like that's what tickles me the most. All the untapped potential and untapped love that exists among humanity that just needs to be held and encouraged to open. That's what's dear to me.

—INTERVIEW BY JESSICA CONRAD

Jessica Conrad is the Content and Community Manager at On The Commons.

The World's Sexiest Cities

What makes a place sensuous?



Barefoot in the park: A lively city with plentiful public spaces stirs romance. *(Photo by operabug under a CC license.)*

There are countless reasons why we love cities, many of them admirably linked to the environmental advantages and sense of community that arise when people live in close proximity.

Yet they also fascinate us for reasons that are less virtuous, but which help explain the enduring appeal of urban life. Cities, in short, are sexy. The seductive quality of some places fills us with longing in the same way as a wink from an attractive stranger.

What is it exactly that quickens our pulse in New Orleans, Rio, Barcelona, or Montreal? No one knows for sure, but I think it's the relaxed sense of existence found in their streetlife, nightlife, and just plain life. An attractive mood of languor permeates these places. Las Vegas, on the other hand, tries too hard to be naughty while South Beach and LA shout glitz and glamour rather than whisper enchantment.

David Lansing, in a 2008 story for *National Geographic Traveler* declared Perugia, Italy, "The World's Sexiest Small City." His criteria, developed with an old college chum over several whiskeys, seems solid: "A sexy city we agreed should be seductive but not garishly provocative, revealing its secrets slowly; it should be classy yet able to please all your senses."

Helen Lawrenson, a saucy essayist of the 1950s, picked Havana as "The Sexiest City in the World" for Esquire magazine in the days prior to the Cuban Revolution. She felt the essence of a seductive city is the absence of a programmed way of living.

“It is a place where nothing ever happens according to plan, but anything else can happen and usually does,” Lawrenson enthused about Havana.

Kaid Benfield, a prolific blogger about cities for the Natural Resources Defense Council website, takes a slightly more rigorous approach by scrutinizing lists of the world’s most romantic cities—sexiness by another name. Prague, Venice, Rome, and Paris wind up on each of the three lists he studied (Lisbon and Vienna appear on two).

He then explores what these four cities share in common:

- A strong sense of place
- Lively, walkable city centers
- Great public spaces
- Traditional neighborhoods enriched by parks and a sense of community
- Openness to diverse cultures
- Compact development and extensive public transit

That closely parallels my own definition of what makes a great city in terms of the commons, community, and sustainability. So it turns out that sexiness is more a virtue than a vice after all.

—JAY WALLJASPER

This article is excerpted from Shareable magazine.

The Fall and Rise of Public Places

Rediscovering the joy of streets, parks, markets, and other congenial hangouts

Opponents of Copenhagen's first pedestrian street warned that people would abandon the area if cars were removed. Now it's the pulsing heart of the city. *(Photo by adrimcm under a CC license.)*

It's a dark and wintry night in Copenhagen, and the streets are bustling. The temperature hovers just above freezing, and winds blow hard enough to knock down parked bicycles. Scandinavians are known for their reserve, but it's all smiles and animated conversation here as people of many ages and affiliations stroll through the city center on a Thursday evening. A knot of teenage boys, each outfitted with a slice of pizza, swagger down the main pedestrian street. Older women discreetly inspect shop windows for the coming spring fashions. Earnest young people collect money for UNICEF relief efforts. Two African men pass by, inexplicably pushing a piano. Candlelit cafes beckon everyone inside.

Public space is a literal commons: the common ground where people come together as friends, neighbors and citizens. Places we share together—parks, streets, sidewalks, squares, trails, markets, waterfronts, beaches, museums, community gardens, public buildings, and more—are the primary sites for human exchange, upon which our communities, economy, democracy, and society depend.

"Cultures and climates differ all over the world," notes architect Jan Gehl, "but people are the same. They will gather in public if you give them a good place to do it."

Gehl, an urban design professor emeritus at the Danish Royal Academy of Fine Arts and international consultant, has charted the progress of Copenhagen's central pedestrian district since it opened in 1962. At that time cars were overrunning the city, and the pedestrian zone was conceived as a way to bring vitality

back to the declining urban center. “Shopkeepers protested vehemently that it would kill their businesses,” he recalls, “but everyone was happy with it once it started.”

The pedestrian zone has been expanded a bit each year ever since, with parking spaces gradually removed and biking and transit facilities improved. Cafes, once thought to be an exclusively Mediterranean institution, have become the center of Copenhagen’s social life. Gehl documents that people’s use of the area has more than tripled over the past 40 years. The pedestrian district is now the thriving heart of a reinvigorated city.

Copenhagen’s comeback gives hope to people around the world who want to make sure lively public places don’t disappear in this era of rampant traffic, proliferating privatization, heightened security measures, overpowering commercialization, and the general indifference of many who think the Internet and their own families can provide all the social interaction they need.

While only a century ago streets almost everywhere were crowded with people, many are now nearly empty—especially in the fast-growing suburbs sprouting all over the globe. Even in Asia and Africa, public spaces are suffering under the onslaught of increasing traffic and misguided development plans imported from the West.

The decline of public places represents a loss far deeper than simple nostalgia for the quiet, comfortable ways of the past. They remain our favorite places to meet, talk, sit, relax, stroll, flirt, and feel part of a broader whole. We are hard-wired with a desire for congenial places to gather. That’s why it’s particularly surprising how much we overlook the importance of public places today.

“If you asked people twenty years ago why they went to central Copenhagen, they would have said it was to shop,” observes Jan Gehl, sitting in the former navy barracks that houses his “urban quality” consulting firm Gehl Architects. “But if you asked them today, they would say, it was because they wanted to go to town.”

That small change of phrase represents the best hope for the future of public spaces. Historically, Gehl explains, public spaces were central to everyone’s lives. It’s how people traveled about town, where they shopped and socialized. But all that changed during the 20th century.

Cars took over the streets in industrialized nations (and in wide swaths of the developing world too), putting many more places within easy reach but making walking, biking, or stopping for a chat dangerous. Telephones, refrigerators, television, suburbs, computers also transformed our daily lives. People withdrew from the public realm. No longer essential, public spaces were neglected. Many newly constructed communities simply forgot about sidewalks, parks, downtowns, transit, playgrounds, and people’s pleasure in taking a walk and bumping into their neighbors. Today, many folks wonder if public spaces serve any real purpose anymore.

“Some places have gone down the drain and become completely deserted,” Gehl notes, brandishing a photo to prove his point. “See this, it’s a health club in Atlanta, in America. It’s built on top of seven stories of parking. People there don’t go out on the streets. They even drive their cars to the health club to get exercise.

“But other places have decided to do something about it; they fight back,” he adds, pointing to another photo—a street where dozens of people are enjoying themselves at an outdoor cafe alongside a sidewalk filled with people. It pictures Norway, but could have been taken anywhere from Beijing to Beirut to Boise and thousands of places in between where local residents have worked to enliven their communities.

Gehl notes how Melbourne, Australia made great efforts to keep its streets pedestrian-friendly by widening sidewalks and adding attractive features, which ignited a spectacular increase in people going out in public. Cordoba, Argentina turned its riverfront into a series of popular parks. Curitiba, Brazil

pioneered an innovative bus rapid transit system that prevented traffic from overwhelming the fast-growing city. Portland, Oregon, put curbs on suburban sprawl and transformed a ho-hum downtown into a bustling urban magnet.

Barcelona best illustrates the power of public spaces. Once thought of as a dull industrial center, it is now mentioned in the same breath as Paris and Rome as the epitome of a great European city. The heart of Barcelona—and of Barcelona's revival—is Las Ramblas, a beloved promenade. In the spirit of liberation following the end of the Franco dictatorship, during which time public assembly was severely discouraged, local citizens and officials created new squares and public spaces all across the city and suburbs to heal the scars of political and civic repression. Some of them fit so well with the urban fabric of the old city that visitors often assume they are centuries old.

The key to restoring life to our public places—and our communities as a whole—is understanding that most people today have more options than in the past. For many people, a trip downtown or to the farmer's market or the local library is now recreational as much as it is practical—the chance to have fun, hang out with other folks, and enjoy the surroundings.

"People are not out in public spaces because they have to be, but because they love to," Gehl explains. "If the place is not appealing they can go elsewhere. That means the quality of public spaces has become very important."

But Gehl, does not want to be misunderstood here. By "quality" he means the quality of a public space as a whole, not just the artistic quality of its design.

Aesthetic quality is just one on a list of 12 steps Gehl devised as a guide to evaluating public spaces (see "12 Steps to Creating a Community Commons"), which includes such prosaic but important matters as providing shelter from the elements and offering a spot to sit.

—JAY WALLJASPER

12 Steps to Creating a Community Commons

Design is only part of what enlivens public spaces

Once dismissed as a provincial city, Barcelona now ranks with Paris and Rome as a European attraction thanks to its lively public spaces. *(Photo by bibhop under a CC license.)*

1. Protection from traffic
2. Protection from crime
3. Protection from the elements
4. A place to walk
5. A place to stop and stand
6. A place to sit
7. Things to see
8. Opportunities for conversations
9. Opportunities for play
10. Human-scale size and sensibility
11. Opportunities to enjoy good weather
12. Aesthetic quality

—JAN GEHL

Gehl is founding Partner of Gehl Associates, a Copenhagen-based urban research and design firm that works around the world.

Around the World in 40 Places

The world's top public spaces can inspire plans in your hometown

Luxembourg Gardens in Paris is a truly delightful place that provides insights for the rest of us. *(Photo by Eric Parker under a CC license.)*

Every community needs a commons where people can gather as friends, neighbors, and citizens. This can be a grand public square, or a vacant lot with a few handmade benches where locals sit down for conversation. Or even a beloved beach, bridge, or bus station, as the examples below show.

What's important are connections made among people, which can lead to wonderful things: friendships, love affairs, or partnerships that flower into new ideas for businesses or community projects.

Project for Public Spaces (PPS), a New York-based group that works around the world helping citizens boost their sense of community, compiled a comprehensive catalog of more than 600 of the best public spaces around the world. From that list, I offer a selection of some of the most inspiring, many of them very modest and in surprisingly humble locations, which offer ideas about creating or improving a commons in your own town.

You can find more information—including practical tips about what make these places succeed—and nominate your own favorite public spaces at PPS's Great Public Spaces Hall of Fame. You can peruse PPS's Hall of Shame to learn what mistakes not to repeat from over 60 of the most disappointing public spaces around the world.

Art Street, Taichung County, Taiwan. A neighborhood shopping street that makes excellent use of traffic calming measures to keep pedestrians safe and happy.

Asafra Beach, Alexandria, Egypt. "Alexandria is Asafra," insist the locals about this beach that runs parallel to the city's main street.

Balboa Park, San Diego, California. An oasis of tropical nature in the midst of a busy city, this public park is home of the internationally known San Diego Zoo.

Bleecker Street, **New York City**. Once the undisputed capital of American Bohemia, this street is still a wonder to stroll with small shops and inviting cafés. Along with San Francisco's North Beach, this is the birthplace of coffee shops in the U.S.

Cai Rang Floating Market, **Can Thao City, Vietnam.** Just like it sounds—vendors sell food, flowers and everything else from boats in the Mekong River.

Campus Martius, **Detroit, Michigan.** A new city square animated by a sidewalk café, music performances, ice skating, and public art, which helped attract people and economic development back downtown.

Carmel Market, **Tel Aviv, Israel.** A lively cornucopia of fresh food, which some days expands into a street market offering arts and crafts.

Charles Bridge, **Prague, Czech Republic.** A beloved gathering point that offers great views of the city and is a scene all in itself.

Country Club Plaza, **Kansas City, Missouri.** The world's first (1922) and best shopping center. It proves you can accommodate automobiles without sacrificing pedestrian amenities. It should be studied closely for ideas on how to transform thousands of failing malls around the U.S. into convivial places.

Covent Garden, **London, England.** A market hall surrounded by bustling pedestrian streets, Covent Gardens is one of the world's leading venues for street buskers as well as opera productions.

Elmwood Avenue District, **Buffalo, New York.** An inviting urban street anchored by funky shops, inviting cafes, pleasing architecture and a wealth of street life.

Fez Souk, **Fez, Morocco.** Souks (street markets) are the classic form of public space throughout the Arab World. The Fez souk is a glorious maze where you'll be thrilled to get lost.

French Quarter, **New Orleans, Louisiana.** Colonial Spanish architecture, great local food, and music galore, plus the highest concentration of colorful characters in the whole U.S. A thriving testament to the principle that old neighborhoods are a city's best asset.

Grand Central Terminal, **New York City.** A palace of a train station—the number one meeting place in North America. Even the lowest-paid worker feels like a king catching a subway or a commuter train in this beautiful place.

Granville Island, **Vancouver, Canada.** An industrial wasteland revived in the 1970s through the creation of parks, arts institutions, and a fabulous public market.

Great Mosque of Djenne, **Djenne, Mali.** An inspiring 1907 mosque hosts a multi-ethnic market in the oldest known city in sub-Saharan Africa.

The High Line, **New York City.** An elevated railway turned into a magnificent park and sculpture garden.

High Park Children's Garden, **Toronto, Canada.** This modest organic garden tended by local kids is the pride of the neighborhood.

Imam Square, **Isfahan, Iran.** One of the most breathtaking squares in the world.

Kyojima, **Tokyo, Japan.** An old-fashioned neighborhood that hangs on to its deep sense of community in the midst of one of the world's largest cities.

Luxembourg Gardens, **Paris, France.** A surprisingly small park with lots of things to do—sail toy boats, eat crepes, watch the world pass by. This is the gold standard by which to measure urban parks.

Mbare Market, Harare, Zimbabwe. You can find it all here—vegetables, plumbing supplies, thumb pianos, ceremonial herbs.

Moscow Subway, Moscow, Russia. The stations are works of art in themselves with marble, chandeliers, and stunning art deco designs.

O'Connell Street, Ennis, Ireland. A world-class main street in a small town that teems with activity all hours of the day.

Ortaköy Square, Istanbul, Turkey. A small waterfront square on the Bosphorus sporting numerous cafés, restaurants, art galleries, and artisan shops.

Pearl District, Portland, Oregon. A brand new neighborhood rising on vacant land in downtown Portland shows we can still build great communities today.

Petaling Street, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The bustling heart of Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown.

Plaza Julio Cortazar, Buenos Aires, Argentina. A square surrounded by cafés and art galleries in one of the most interesting neighborhoods in the world—Palermo Viejo.

Piazza del Campo, Siena, Italy. An artistic triumph of Renaissance architecture and one of the first squares in Europe to reassert its role as a commons by banning automobiles in the 1960s.

The Plateau, Montreal, Canada. A picturesque working-class quarter transformed into the artistic and cultural hotbed of Quebec.

Ponce Center City, Ponce, Puerto Rico. A once-rundown district that is now a showcase of classic Caribbean architecture.

The Prado, Havana, Cuba. A marvelous 10-block promenade through the Old City.

The Ridge, Shimla, India. A beautiful central square overlooking the city and out on the Himalayas.

Staples Street Bus Station, Corpus Christi, Texas. A bus transfer center brought energy back downtown in this small city. Even folks not waiting for buses like to hang out there and look at the tiles hand painted by school kids.

Tamansari Water Castle, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. An 18th century water garden that's the centerpiece of a dynamic neighborhood.

Taos Pueblo, Taos, New Mexico. A high-rise adobe town that's been home to Pueblo Indians since at least the 1500s.

Tivoli Gardens, Copenhagen, Denmark. The never-equaled ancestor of all theme parks has been a source of pleasure for visitors since 1843.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, DC. An oasis of reflection and emotion, which proves how public art can touch the lives of millions.

Waterlooplein, Amsterdam, Netherlands. A world-class flea market.

Wisconsin State Capitol, Madison, Wisconsin. A handsome building that is truly a crossroads of democracy, serving as a town square where citizens meet legislators as we saw in the massive 2011 rallies.

—JAY WALLJASPER & PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES

What is Placemaking?

Here's the scoop from Project for Public Spaces, which has been doing it in communities around the world since 1975

Placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design, and management of public spaces. Put simply, it involves looking at, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work, and play in a particular space to discover their needs and aspirations. This information is then used to create a common vision for that place. The vision can evolve quickly into an implementation strategy, beginning with small-scale, do-able improvements that can immediately bring benefits to public spaces and the people who use them.

"Placemaking is both an overarching idea and a hands-on tool for improving a neighborhood, city, or region," explains the Metropolitan Planning Council of Chicago. "It has the potential to be one of the most transformative ideas of this century."

Placemaking capitalizes on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, ultimately creating good public spaces that promote people's health, happiness, and well being. It strikes a balance between the physical, the social and even the spiritual qualities of a place.

Placemaking is both a process and a philosophy. It takes root when a community expresses needs and desires about places in their lives, even if there is not yet a clearly defined plan of action. The yearning to unite people around a larger vision for a particular place is often present long before the word "Placemaking" is ever mentioned. Once the term is introduced, however, it enables people to realize just how inspiring their collective vision can be, and allows them to look with fresh eyes at the potential of parks, downtowns, waterfronts, plazas, neighborhoods, streets, markets, campuses, and public buildings. It sparks an exciting re-examination of everyday settings and experiences in our lives.

Unfortunately the way our communities are built today has become so institutionalized that community stakeholders seldom have a chance to voice ideas and aspirations about the places they inhabit. Placemaking breaks through this by showing planners, designers, and engineers how to move beyond their habit of looking at communities through the narrow lens of single-minded goals or rigid professional disciplines. The first step is listening to the best experts in the field—the people who live, work, and play in a place.

Fortunately, it turns out that when developers and planners welcome as much grassroots involvement as possible, they spare themselves a lot of headaches. Serious problems like traffic-dominated streets, little-used parks, community opposition, and isolated, underperforming development projects can be avoided by embracing the Placemaking perspective that views a place in its entirety, rather than zeroing in on isolated fragments of the whole.

Adapted from the website of Project for Public Spaces, a nonprofit planning, design, and educational organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build stronger communities.

Nourishing the Urban Spirit

A cathedral reaches out to the city

Rev. Tracey Lind, dean of Trinity Cathedral, is a placemaker in the tradition of Saint Angela Merici. *(Photo courtesy of Cool Cleveland.com.)*

There is a profound spiritual dimension to the commons, notes Rev. Tracey Lind, dean of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Cleveland. Indeed, one of the most enduring forms of commons in the world today are the sacred places that play an essential part in nearly all religions: temples, shrines, ritual sites, burial grounds, pilgrimage paths, holy springs, holy forests, holy mountains.

The religious nature of these places mean they are generally open to everyone for prayer, ceremonies, and socializing. For example, Lind points out, "The famous Gothic cathedral of Chartres did not belong to just priests and bishops. It was a part of the whole community. Even today everyone in town can claim it as theirs, and feel proud of it."

"What would happen if we made all houses of worship in this country into commons?" asks Lind, who is also a city planner. "Where we could come together. Rich and poor. Black, white, and brown. Young and old. Gay and straight. There aren't many places where that can happen today."

And that is precisely what she did with Trinity Commons—the most ambitious new development for her inner city neighborhood in decades. She brought a coffee shop, art gallery, conference rooms, and public square to the grounds of Trinity Cathedral.

Anyone can come to browse, relax with a cup of coffee, walk the labyrinth, pray, reflect, read, check their email on the cathedral's Wi-Fi system, or take part in one of the many events—religious and secular—that go on at the church. "Last year we hosted 1,600 public events attracting 41,000 people," Lind proudly notes.

Lind's inspiration for Trinity Commons is Saint Angela Merici, who founded the Ursulines religious community in the 16th Century. "St. Angela, a native of northern Italy, instructed her sisters to be like a piazza. By that, she meant them to be open, gracious, hospitable, and engaged in the world," she explains.

Lind traveled to Italy several years ago to study the role of piazzas in modern-day Italian life, finding out that "Each piazza is different in ethos, but all have essentially the same characteristics. They are found in the center of the city and tucked away in neighborhoods. You never know what will happen in a piazza; you should always expect the unexpected, the serendipitous and the spontaneous."

—JAY WALLJASPER

Best Little Movie House in the Adirondacks

When the lights went out at the local theater, folks rallied to reopen it

Folks in Indian Lake, NY view their local movie theater as a community commons.

It is Saturday night at the Indian Lake Theater in upstate Indian Lake, New York. The previews of coming attractions are playing when suddenly the sound slows down to gibberish and the screen goes black. I am the projectionist so I rush upstairs and find a tangled pile of film unraveling onto the floor. I run back downstairs to face the puzzled crowd, telling them I'm going to do my best to fix the problem. To my nervous surprise, everyone cheers.

The theater, on Main Street in a small town of 2,000 in the Adirondack mountains, was closed for two years, so moviegoers are grateful to have the place back, and they're willing to cut me some slack.

When the theater shut its doors in 2006, local residents not only missed seeing the latest movie hits, but also a congenial spot to see one another. In addition, the town's economy and culture suffered when the theater closed. Many local merchants reported that the loss of the theater adversely affected their businesses—from the ice cream shop and the hotel to local restaurants and antique stores. People came to town for a movie but stuck around to eat, shop, or see friends.

A group of citizens from towns throughout the region came together in fall of 2007 to devise a plan for purchasing and reopening the theater as a non-profit community stage and screen. When word of the project spread across the Adirondacks, many folks sent donations to support it. A community board of directors, whose mission is strengthening the sense of community as well as watching the bottom line, now manages the operation.

The theater has a paid director and young people make good wages selling tickets and popcorn. A corps of volunteers handle other tasks that make it possible for the Indian Lake Theater to host other events such as school music and theater productions, public meetings, and even a Magic Lantern performance to celebrate the town's sesquicentennial. The theater is now more of a local commons than ever.

Harriet Barlow, who helped organize efforts to save the theater, notes "The theater provides a sort of living room for the community, a rare opportunity for cooperation and collaboration. Most of all, it makes people happy!"

—D. MEGAN HEALEY

Why Some Great Public Spaces Are Not Public

The old phrase "use it or lose it" applies to favorite neighborhood businesses

City Lights bookstore in San Francisco is more than a place to buy books. It's a community institution where you can strike up a conversation or read a poem. *(Photo by Fingle under a CC license.)*

Some of the most beloved commons in our lives are not technically commons. They are privately run enterprises that nonetheless function as common gathering spots that loyal customers feel belong to them.

Think of your favorite coffee shop, bookstore, tavern, cafe, record store, diner, social hall, corner grocery, music store, bowling alley, art supply store, skate shop, barber shop or hair salon, antique store, vintage clothing boutique, and other businesses you frequent as much for the chance to run into interesting people as for the products and services you need. These are all private establishments that play a semi-

public role. Urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls these "third places" and makes a convincing case that they are woefully under appreciated as part of the social fabric that holds our society together.

The owners of these shops, at least those who stay in business very long, understand that dispensing caffeine, novels, or pale ale is not their primary line of work. Their success depends on providing us with a congenial public place to hang out—and because of that we will gladly spend our money.

I like the way the English acknowledge this with the name they use for pub owners and managers: Publicans. It would be a great world if all small business owners thought of themselves as Publicans, looking for ways to promote public life.

Public life is not a zero-sum game. I think the more public life that exists in private places, the more people will insist on strong public places too.

Some third place commons, especially book and record stores and neighborhood shops, are experiencing intense economic pressures from Internet sales, new technology, big-box chain competitors, and the continuing economic pinch that forces most of us to cut back spending even at places we love.

Unfair tax laws also play a big role. Internet businesses are generally free from sales taxes, while brick-and-mortar stores must tack on three, four, five, six, or seven percent to each order. Any way you look at it, this is a government-sanctioned bribe to buy from Amazon instead of your local book dealer, e-Bay rather than that cool vintage store around the corner. The Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) offers the Marketplace Fairness Act, which factually makes the case for a level playing field between community stores and Internet merchandisers.

But even with the weak economy and competition from Internet free riders, many POPS (privately-owned public spaces) continue to flourish sustaining the life of main streets and urban commercial districts. Many neighborhood shops may enjoy an advantage over big box stores in competing with Internet retailers. Since they are right around the corner, they can match Amazon for convenience, while a trip to Wal-Mart or Home Depot means getting in the car, fighting traffic, and standing in lines. These independent merchants are also more fun to visit, offering a sense of local personality and a community atmosphere that mega-retailers lack. And, don't forget, they boost our communities far more than big retailers, as ample research collected by ILSR shows.

To ensure their future, many neighborhood merchants are cooperating to form Business Improvement Districts. This is a well-proven model where local shops work together to spruce up commercial streets by adding nice landscaping, fixing up the storefronts, improving lighting and other amenities—all of which heightens appeal to shoppers tired of sterile big-boxes and the disconnected Internet. Businesses also cooperate on advertising campaigns, special neighborhood events, shared parking facilities, and other improvements.

Many merchants are banding together in an even bigger way by creating local Independent Business Alliances (IBA), which draw public attention to the numerous benefits of locally owned businesses (how often do big boxes sponsor an art fair or online retailers buy uniforms for the local little league team?) and lobbying political officials and the media to take note of unfair economic tactics wielded by their big time competitors.

The first IBA began in Boulder, Colorado in 1997 and within two years involved 150 local businesses. There are now IBAs across North America, and a national group, the American Independent Business Alliance, based in Bozeman, Montana.

—JAY WALLJASPER

Is it Possible to Design Great New Public Spaces?

Yes, but we must break out of old patterns.

Crossroads Mall in suburban Seattle has been refashioned into a genuine community space, complete with giant chessboard. *(Photo by 4Chaos under a CC license.)*

Great public spaces resemble pornography, at least in the way the U.S. Supreme Court defines it: "You know it when you see it."

Gazing upon great spots like the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris, 125th Street in Harlem, the street market in Fez, Morocco, or even the Main Street in a lively small town, you instinctually exclaim, "This is great!" You know it because you want to stay there, watching all the people passing by, soaking up the atmosphere. Sure, you might sit down to order a cup of coffee or browse through a book store, or even buy $40 of socks, but the real reason you're there, and why you'll come back again at the first opportunity, is the place itself. It's where you feel at home, relaxed, and energized at the same time.

But while it's easy to recognize a great public space, it appears hard to build a new one today based on what you see in many cities. Projects setting out to establish a congenial spot for people to congregate wind up creating places that appear hostile to very idea of people enjoying themselves there.

William H. Whyte, the noted journalist and pioneering force (along with Jane Jacobs) in getting Americans to recognize the importance of public spaces, once observed, "It's hard to create a place that will not attract people. What's remarkable is how often this has been accomplished."

You can't blame the public for thinking that the ability to create urban spaces that lift people's spirits has been almost bred out of contemporary planners and designers.

But the real culprit is the whole process of how we now build public spaces. Planning today is narrowly focused on specific outcomes—sales revenue per square foot of retail space, vehicles moved per hour, or even unimpeachably admirable aims like affordable housing units created. And these outcomes are often mandated by wrongheaded zoning regulations that demand so many parking spaces in a project or dictate what activities are allowed.

These projects are a success to the extent that cash registers go ka-ching and cars move swiftly, but they fail at the equally important mission of creating lively places where people can feel comfortable and happy hanging out and rubbing shoulders with their fellow citizens. It's another example of the tragedy of the commons. The value of a particular place to the public as a whole is trumped by the more narrow privatized needs of retailers, motorists, etc.

It doesn't have to be that way. Looking the world over you can find brilliant examples of newer public spaces that also succeed marvelously as shopping destinations (Granville Island in Vancouver), transportation corridors (Portland's trolley through the new Pearl District), or affordable neighborhoods (troubled public housing projects that have been transformed into thriving communities such as EW Park DuValle in Louisville and Diggs Town in Norfolk, Virginia). All that's needed is a perspective that recognizes a place's broader role as a commons alongside its other purposes.

A great example of how to do this can be found, in all places, at a shopping mall in the Seattle suburb of Bellevue, Washington. At first glance, the Crossroads mall—a standard-issue 1970s enclosed mall surrounded by acres of parking—seems way off-the-radar of any efforts to promote public space and preserve the commons.

But look again. Whimsical public art dots the parking lot, and cafe tables and sidewalk merchandise displays flank the entrances—just like in a classic downtown. Wandering through the mall you find the local public library, a police station, and a branch of city hall, where I am told "you can do nearly everything they do at the main office." There are even comfy chairs stationed right outside the bathrooms and a giant-sized chess board where kids can push around bishops almost as big as they are. Some of the usual franchise suspects are here, but so are locally-owned businesses and a food court with local restaurateurs.

Many of the tables face a stage, where on one particular Thursday during Black History Month it features an impressive program of music, theatre, and dance—all of it first rate. The audience is multi-ethnic, reflecting the changing demographics of American suburbia. The loudest applause comes from a delegation of pre-schoolers visiting from a nearby daycare center. I pinch myself to make sure this is all real, that I am actually at a shopping mall.

Now, of course, I would prefer to hangout in Pike Place Market, one of the world's great public spaces a few miles away in downtown Seattle. So would many of the people here at Crossroads. But the fact is that they live in Bellevue, and it's a great thing they have a place where they can take care of their errands, meet their neighbors, and have some fun. If a lively public place and neighborhood commons can take root here, it can happen anywhere.

—JAY WALLJASPER

In Praise of Vacant Lots

Commoners keep open spaces part of the public realm

Volunteers in Albany, New York transform an abandoned lot into a public space as part of a program run by Grand Street Community Arts. *(Photo by Sebastien Barre under a CC license.)*

It's easy to talk about the importance of the commons in grand terms—vast stretches of breathtaking wilderness, publicly funded advances in science and technology, essential cultural and civic institutions, the air and water which we all depend on for survival.

But let's not forget the lowly commons all around that enrich our lives. Things like sidewalks, playgrounds, community gardens, murals, neighborhood hangouts, and vacant lots. Especially vacant lots.

Modern society's obsession with efficiency, productivity, and purposefulness sometimes blinds us to the epic possibilities of empty spaces that aren't serving any profitable economic function. The word "vacant" itself implies that these places are devoid of value.

But think back to all the imaginative uses you could discover for vacant land as a kid. You probably realized someone else owned it, but it was still yours to run around, play ball, plant a garden, host tea parties, pitch a tent or just get away from the watchful eye of adults. Thankfully, commoners in many places are working to make sure that vacant lots will be there for future generations of kids.

Jonathan Rowe, who wrote with keen insight about the commons until his death in 2011, became a champion of shared public space in his home, Point Reyes Station, California, where several vacant lots sat on Main Street. "A friend and I decided to see if we could make a commons happen there just by seeding it a bit," he writes in the book Our Common Wealth.

They fixed up some old garden benches and quietly deposited them in the lots along with other seats made out of tree stumps. "People started using the benches, talking and sipping and just resting their feet."

It quickly became the heart of town and West Marin Commons, a group he co-founded secured a long-term lease for the lot, which is now commonly called Jon Rowe Park.

A bigger scale example is the 596 Acres project, which identified every last parcel of publicly owned vacant land in Brooklyn with an eye to opening them up to the community for gardens and informal parks. The project is now expanding across the city, and the 596 Acres website offers detailed information on how to begin the process of turning vacant lots (including those now locked behind fences or privately owned) into community commons.

— JAY WALLJASPER

Lost Green Spaces Right Under Our Noses

Cemeteries were once seen as parks, which is beginning to happen again

New Yorkers enjoying the 12th Annual Memorial Day Concert at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. *(Photo by "Lost in Brooklyn" under a CC license.)*

It is a little-known fact that the vision and inspiration for great public commons like New York's Central Park originated from cemeteries. While many modern-day cemeteries occupy valuable land in central city locations, they are generally viewed as exclusively for mourners and the dead, rather than being an integral part of their surrounding communities.

Visitors flocked to the cemeteries in the mid-nineteenth century as calm oases away from the chaos and commercialism of American cities. The increasing separation of death from public life throughout the 20th century and the development of urban park systems left most cemeteries as forgotten places, which people thought of as morbid rather than the jubilant and leisurely destinations they once were.

When Mount Auburn Cemetery outside of Cambridge, Massachusetts opened in 1831, its 178 acres became the first large-scale designed landscape open to the public in the United States. The idyllic natural landscape, wide roads, winding pathways, ornamental plantings, monuments, fences, and fountains created a relaxing rural feel. When Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn opened in 1838, it proved enormously popular and was the site of many family outings and even carriage rides. By 1860, Green-Wood attracted 500,000 visitors a year, rivaling Niagara Falls as the country's greatest tourist attraction.

A young Englishman visiting the United States in the 1850s commented that "Cemeteries here are all the rage. People lounge in them and use them for walking, making love, weeping, sentimentalizing, and every thing in short." As David Charles Sloane writes in his book The Last Great Necessity, about the dedication of Oakwood Cemetery in Syracuse, New York in 1859, "Over one-third of the city's fifteen thousand people attended the dedication. They watched three bands, the mayor and common council, the clergy, the fire department, representatives of the Odd Fellows and YMCA, and the Fifty First Regiment of the New York State Militia march three miles from downtown Syracuse to the cemetery. There they listened to music and poetry."

Over the past decade, Americans have rediscovered cemeteries. (In many other cultures, they were never deemed off-limits to the living.) The Hollywood Forever Cemetery in Los Angeles (the final resting place of Rudolph Valentino, Jayne Mansfield, and Joey Ramone among others) has likely been the most successful in getting people to visit and take interest through entertainment. For more than ten years, it has opened its gates for a weekly movie series, Cinespia. According to the Los Angeles Times, the cemetery screenings now draw an average of 3,000 guests every weekend. In addition, the cemetery has added a music series in which well-known indie-rock performers such as The Flaming Lips, Bon Iver, and Bright Eyes have performed. Green-Wood Cemetery has similarly enlivened their grounds with musical, theatrical and dance performances. In Minneapolis the long-neglected Pioneers and Soldiers Cemetery (also known as Layman's Cemetery), has hosted benefit concerts by favorite local musicians to help restore the historic place.

—AARON HANAUER & COLLEEN AYERS

Aaron Hanauer has been a city planner for the City of Minneapolis for six years, focusing primarily on historic preservation. Colleen Ayers manages non-profit professional associations at the Harrington Company.

Youth Center Run as a Direct Democracy

A participant explains their model of collective ownership

The Northfield Union of Youth has run The Key community center since 1993.

In downtown Northfield, Minnesota, you'll find The Key—the longest running youth-run youth center in the country. Founded in 1993 by the Northfield Union of Youth, it is powered entirely by the sustainable energy of young people. In other words, it's a commons. Every youth, like me, who walks into the Key is an owner.

For 20 years, a youth board has run fundraising, events, programs, general management, community service, building operations, and organizational structure. There is an adult executive director to provide guidance to the board in places were we are inexperienced, as well as an adult board to offer a connection to the rest of the community and legal guidance. However there is no question who runs the place.

"The Key works because the kids who run it really care about it and so does the Northfield community," says George Zuccolotto, the current youth board president and first Latino president of the Union Of Youth. "The Key has given me connections to community, something to really care about. I'm not just a dumb kid, I'm seen as a person with a legitimate perspective."

Current programs include a book club—we choose the book and how much to read and then discuss it. Movie night is usually just watching a thoughtful or humorous movie, sometimes discussing the theme or story. Family game night is a time to play board games, charades, kick ball, cards, or whatever we want to do that night.

Art night is one of The Key's most successful programs. It is not often that you get to see a cluster of aggressive, young, "punk" boys embroidering flowers onto hats and towels, but it happens at The Key. Art night coordinators bring in supplies and materials and everyone at The Key generally ends up getting involved. The Key also hosts concerts and dances that bring in youth from all demographics. One of our most successful endeavors in our bi-annual Hip Hop Blowout, a showcase of local rappers and dancers.

I want to be clear that The Key is truly engaging and empowering to disenfranchised youth primarily because of its commons-based management structure and ownership model. It is through the commons that we are able to engage the passions of young people even in a time of widespread apathy. At The Key, we can give power to those who feel they have none, bring a sense of self-worth to all, and further the cause of a just world.

—CLIFF MARTIN

Cliff Martin is a student and an activist focused on learning about interconnected processes around this central question: What makes change in the world?

A City Lover's Guide to America's Most Surprising City

Detroit offers tourists unexpected urban pleasures

Eastern Market, one of the nation's largest public markets, is a source of pride, as well as fresh food, for Detroiters. *(Photo by Dig Downtown Detroit under a CC license.)*

For those of us who love cities in all their giddy gritty glory, the Motor City awaits. Although it has struggled in recent decades, Detroit still offers experiences you expect from a world-class city: heart-stopping architecture, a bustling waterfront, topnotch art, nightlife, great food, picturesque city squares, a jam-packed public market, memorable strolls, and a spirit of cooperation that's bringing genuine change.

Let me start this tour of the city with a confession. Despite being a lifelong Midwesterner and veteran travel writer, I always avoided Detroit. I expected to be depressed by seeing a once-grand place battered by economic disinvestment and all-for-the-auto urban planning. Finally making the trip three years ago, I witnessed scenes of abandonment and decay that almost broke my heart—but also examples of perseverance and creativity that stirred my soul.

You can witness these grassroots efforts to put the city back on its feet. Not willing to see their city deteriorate further, many citizen-led groups are embracing the ideals of the commons in areas such as public water, local food, and housing.

Detroit will constantly surprise you, beginning with the fact that you can actually see a lot of the Motor City comfortably on foot. Woodward Avenue offers an intriguing urban promenade covering two miles between Midtown and Downtown—the nuclei of Detroit's current revitalization efforts. Home to Wayne State University and the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), Midtown is a haven for the young and the hip of all races.

Stroll south on Woodward Avenue from the city-owned DIA (which showcases excellent collections of European and African-American painting, as well Diego Rivera's legendary murals of auto assembly lines) and you'll see new housing and office developments with shops on the ground floor in the classic urban style—signs of Midtown's building boom. There's actually a housing shortage in Midtown right now, as burgeoning numbers of young people along with employees of Wayne State and the nearby Henry Ford Health System and Detroit Medical Center seek to move into the neighborhood.

Coming into downtown, you'll pass Grand Circus Park, one of several landscaped squares downtown laid out 300 years ago as part of the city's European-style street plan. Handsome mid-rise buildings line Woodward and surrounding avenues, a number of them empty but not detracting too much from the urban atmosphere. Campus Martius—an inviting square renovated in 2004 to include a café, music stage, ice rink and mesmerizing fountain—lured $500 million in new development to adjacent blocks.

Woodward Avenue meets the Detroit River at Hart Plaza, the social focal point of downtown and site of many festivals throughout the summer. Check out the deeply moving Underground Railroad Memorial showing escaped slaves looking across the river toward Canada.

Another pleasurable stroll is the River Walk, which edges the turquoise Detroit River five miles from downtown to Belle Isle, a Frederick Law Olmsted park with sweeping lawns and landscaped lagoons occupying a 982-acre island. (Or see the sights on a rental bike.)

You'll pass Renaissance Center, GM headquarters and a poster child of the misguided 1970s strategy to renew downtowns by concentrating new development in fortresses set apart from everyone else. A short way up the path, you can enjoy a picnic or just kick back in the shadow of the lighthouse in William A. Milliken State Park, Michigan's first urban state park. It's the trailhead for the DeQuindre Cut Greenway, a rail line fashioned into an oasis-like biking and hiking trail leading one mile to the edge of the Eastern Market—which features 250 vendors from the region, plus surrounding blocks filled with bountiful bakeries, meat markets, and specialty gourmet shops.

Corktown, next door to Midtown, draws young people with its plentiful loft apartments and hipsterati hot spots like Slow's Bar BQ and the Sugar House. Stirrings of revitalization can also be felt in Southwest Detroit—an immigrant haven that registers the lowest family income of any area in Detroit but nonetheless shows many signs of a thriving community. Roughly 40 percent African-American, 40 percent Latino and 20 percent white, it's home to active community organizations, small businesses, ethnic restaurants, intact historic neighborhoods and a walkable commercial district along Vernor Highway that would please Jane Jacobs.

Hamtramck, an independent city enclosed by the North side of Detroit, once a bastion of Polish immigrants is now a racially diverse community favored by Bangladeshis, Arabs, Bosnians, Albanians, and young people of all backgrounds. You'll find great Bangladeshi food at Aladdin, exquisite crafts and imports (plus a treasure trove of polka recordings) at the Polish Art Center, and live indy rock at clubs scattered throughout town.

You wouldn't go to Athens or Rome without seeing the ruins, and neither would many visitors to Detroit. The city's industrial free fall and corresponding plummet in population (from 1,850,000 in 1950 to 700,000 today) has resulted in some spectacular scenes of devastation—painstakingly documented by photographers in a new genre dubbed "ruin porn."

The two best examples are: 1) Michigan Central Railroad Depot, an imposing 18-story train station on the edge of Corktown where every single pane of glass is busted out; and 2) the Packard Plant, a 3,500,000 square-foot auto factory by eminent architect Albert Kahn on East Grand Boulevard, which was abandoned in 1958 and later made musical history as the site where techno music gained popularity at raves in the late 1980s.

Less than four miles west on Grand Boulevard is an even more world-renown musical shrine—a modest frame house where Berry Gordy lived on the second floor and superstars like Stevie Wonder, the Jacksons, Diana Ross & the Supremes, Marvin Gaye, the Temptations, and Four Tops recorded a stream of hits in the basement. It's a religious experience to enter the small Motown Records studio with the original Steinway piano, Hammond B-3 organ, and furnishings. You can see the dining room table that served as the company's shipping department, the couch where Marvin Gaye sometimes slept after all-night recording sessions, and the desk where a receptionist named Martha Reeves greeted visitors. That's the same Martha Reeves who later sang one of the most memorable odes extolling the sheer exuberance of city life:

Summer's here and the time is right
For dancin' in the streets
They're dancin' in Chicago
Down in New Orleans
Up in New York City…
Philadelphia, PA
Baltimore and DC now
Yeah, don't forget the Motor City
(Can't forget the Motor City)

Martha Reeves and the Vandellas got it right back in 1964—anyone who truly savors urban life can't forget the Motor City.

—JAY WALLJASPER

The Unexpected Renaissance of a Mining Town

A small town thrives thanks to a new collaborative vision

"I think of myself as a weaver. I try to help connect people who are dying to be connected, but don't know it yet, to improve the true health and wealth of our community." —Tom Stearns

Here is a small town that has bounced back thanks to a different vision of agriculture where scale matters, stakeholders collaborate, and, in most cases, ownership has more to do with stewardship than it does with possession. Community members know each other by name and value civic engagement. Young people who moved away for bigger and "better" opportunities now flock home. This town, Hardwick, Vermont, embodies the spirit of the commons in so many ways—but it wouldn't be that way without the work of Tom Stearns, an ardent commons advocate and the founder of High Mowing Organic Seeds.

A hallmark of the company is that the High Mowing team engages with everyone who uses seeds: the farmers and gardeners, plant breeders at universities, other seed companies, and soil scientists. They do this in an effort to bring a broader collective wisdom to bear on how to develop new seed varieties and how to promote them as a critical element in building healthy food systems. By encouraging this knowledge sharing, High Mowing empowers the whole community to engage in a ten thousand-year-old agrarian tradition that is vital for the future.

The High Mowing team also engages their immediate community in many ways—from lending money to sharing employees to developing co-marketing programs with other local companies. On the

day I spoke with Stearns, Pete Johnson of Pete's Greens had planted three acres of carrots on the land he rents from High Mowing. Together with another seed breeder, Johnson and Stearns are working to develop a new organic carrot variety.

While this level of commoning may seem out of the ordinary, it is only the beginning. Stearns is also a co-founder of the Center for an Agricultural Economy, a Hardwick-based nonprofit that coordinates regional food system activity. Among many other contributions to the community, the nonprofit just purchased the old town common. It once appeared there was little hope that Hardwick, an aging granite-mining center, would ever recover from the collapse of the mining industry. The town common had been neglected since the 1930s, but members of the Center for an Agricultural Economy saw its potential to the community and purchased the 16 acres in the heart of Hardwick. Stearns describes all kinds of activity planned for the property, including an educational farm and community garden.

The combined effect of these many assorted commons solutions is a small town renaissance no one could have expected in Hardwick. Stearns describes countless new economic opportunities growing up around healthy food, ecological awareness, and value-added agriculture. There are new jobs—good jobs—at High Mowing and elsewhere. The rural "brain drain" is reversing in this area, as smart young people who moved away are coming home. People are once again running for town select boards and school boards. "People are actually competing [for those positions] because they want to have a voice," Stearns says. "It's really cool."

—JESSICA CONRAD

Jessica Conrad is the Content and Community Manager at On the Commons.

26 Ways to Make Great Places

Have fun while building a better world

E.F. Schumacher (author of Small is Beautiful*) offered timeless advice about how to boost our communities, "Perhaps we cannot raise the wind. But each of us can put up the sail, so that when the wind comes we can catch it."*

Here's a handy list of ways you can capture the breeze in the place you call home. And we're sure you'll discover more ideas of your own.

The best reason for creating community is that it will enrich all of our lives. *(Photo by Woodley Wonder Works under a CC license.)*

1. **Challenge the prevailing myth** that all problems have private, individualized solutions.

2. **Notice how many of life's pleasures** exist outside the marketplace—gardening, fishing, conversing, playing music, playing ball, making love, enjoying nature, and more.

3. **Take time to enjoy** what your corner of the world offers. (As the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire once declared, "We are bigger than our schedules.")

4. **Have some fun.** The best reason for making great places is that it will enliven all of our lives.

5. **Offer a smile** or greeting to people you pass. Community begins with connecting—even in brief, spontaneous ways.

6. **Walk, bike, or take transit** whenever you can. It's good for the environment, but also for you. You make very few friends behind the wheel of your car.

7. **Treat common spaces as if you own them** (which, actually, you do). Pick up litter. Keep an eye on the place. Tidy things up. Report problems or repair things yourself. Initiate improvements.

8. **Pull together a potluck.** Throw a block party. Form a community choir, slow food club, Friday night poker game, seasonal festival, or any other excuse for socializing.

9. **Get out of the house** and spend some time on the stoop, the front yard, the street—anywhere you can be a part of the river of life that flows past.

10. **Create or designate a "town square"** for your neighborhood where folks naturally want to gather—a park, playground, vacant lot, community center, coffee shop, or even a street corner.

11. **Lobby for more public benches**, water fountains, plazas, parks, sidewalks, bike trails, playgrounds, and other crucial commons infrastructure.

12. **Take matters into your own hands** and add a bench to your front yard or transform a vacant lot into a playground.

13. **Conduct an inventory of local commons.** Publicize your findings, and offer suggestions for celebrating and improving these community assets.

14. **Organize your neighbors** to prevent crime and to defuse the fear of crime, which often dampens a community's spirits even more than crime itself.

15. **Remember streets belong to everyone**, not just automobiles. Drive cautiously and push for traffic calming and other improvements that remind motorists they are not kings of the road.

16. **Buy from local, independent businesses** whenever possible. (For more information see American Independent Business Alliance and the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies).

17. **Form a neighborhood exchange** to share everything from lawn mowers to childcare to vehicles.

18. **Barter.** Trade your skill in baking pies with someone who will fix your computer.

19. **Join campaigns opposing cutbacks in public assets** like transit, schools, libraries, parks, social services, police and fire protection, arts programs, and more.

20. **Write letters to the editor** about the importance of community commons, post on local websites, call into talk radio, tell your friends.

21. **Learn from everywhere.** What can Copenhagen teach us about bicycles? India about wellness? Africa about community solidarity? Indigenous nations about the commons itself? What bright ideas could be borrowed from a nearby neighborhood or town?

22. **Become a guerrilla gardener**, planting flowers and vegetables on neglected land in your neighborhood.

23. **Organize a community garden** or local farmer's market.

24. **Roll up your sleeves** to restore a creek, wetland, woods, or grasslands.

25. **Form a study group** to explore what can be done to improve your community.

26. **Think yourself as a local patriot** and share your enthusiasm.