

Public space planning

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Public space provides the grounds for cities to be seen and experienced. Whether it is a square, a market, or a park, public space in cities has been noted as the place where ideas are exchanged, city identity is built and citizenship is learned (Carr et al. , 1992; Low, 2000; Goodsell, 2003). Such places are important and even necessary for citizens to enjoy a good quality of life and well-being (Relph, 1993). Historically, public places have played an important role in cities in many cultures.

Public spaces such as the Greek agora, Spanish plaza, and colonial town square provided a place for markets, celebrations and civic life to flourish (Carr et al. , 1992). In modern cities public spaces play many diverse roles; they are sites of recreation, economic development, consumption and community; they take shape as plazas, parks and urban entertainment areas; they mean many things to many people and can establish an identity for a neighborhood or a city at large. Public spaces, in any incarnation, are important to civic life (Goodsell, 2003).

While we may have a good understanding of why public spaces are important in cities, what is still largely unknown is how the planning process itself contributes to the development of these important places. In addition to understanding the role of public spaces in cities today, the means of public space creation, the underlying interests, processes, and motivations involved with their construction, must also be scrutinized and better understood in order to come to a full understanding of how public spaces achieve their desired goals.

Two case studies were chosen to illustrate approaches to public space planning: Toronto's Yonge Dundas Square and the City of Mississauga's City

Centre Parks. These sites were chosen because of their similarities and also because of their differences. Both sites were intended to achieve similar goals of creating a sense of place and creating new opportunities for economic development in their cities. Their efforts, though, are taking place in very different contexts and employ different planning approaches.

In Mississauga, a rapidly growing city with a developing downtown core, a “placemaking” process featuring public workshops and staff training was used. In the Yonge Dundas Square example, located at one of Toronto’s historic commercial nodes, a public-private partnership was used to achieve the goals of the project. In addition, the cases are also at different stages in their development. The Mississauga project has only completed its initial visioning and preliminary design stages while the Yonge Dundas Square project is nearing completion.

In choosing these disparate cases, I was able to explore the strengths and weaknesses of different styles of public space planning. Specifically, these cases allowed me to investigate differences between what seemed to be a tightly controlled planning process in Yonge Dundas Square and a seemingly very public planning process in Mississauga. Ultimately, the comparison of these cases helped me to elicit relevant criticisms and policy recommendations for planners of public space, regardless of the process they are working within.

Through research about these case studies, key informant interviews and in-depth analysis of planning documents and relevant literature this report presents a critique of public space planning processes practiced in the context of Yonge Dundas Square and the City Centre Parks. While having

goals that use the language of sense of place, the planning processes employed are more effective in serving the economic goals of the projects. Because socio-cultural goals like sense of place are defined broadly and grow over time, the planning process does little to directly address them.

Ultimately this report suggests that socio-cultural goals like sense of place should not be removed as a goal of public space planning, but rather, the planning process should attempt to reconcile economic and socio-cultural goals. By increasing awareness of the importance of the socio-cultural function of public space through educational outreach to developers and the public at large, as well as by incorporating socio-cultural goals into long-term strategic plans and mission statements, municipalities can more effectively create public spaces that are not only economically strong, but also socially important to their citizens.