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Creating public spaces to become local destinations teaming with energy and activity - by James Shaffer

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We all have places that we go to on a regular basis. Those places are almost magical. It's our local hangout. Sometimes we go there alone, meet friends there, or run into people that we know and every now and then, we meet new friends there. The location is full of energy, and we always seem to have a great time there.

When's the last time you felt that way about a public space? Chances are you haven't. We tend to think of most public spaces as empty unoccupied places that are boring. However, public spaces don't have to be that way. They can be or become local destinations teaming with energy and activity.

Here's a few ideas to consider:

1) Think of public spaces as a giant laboratory. Given the opportunity and a little thought, you would probably agree that most public spaces are designed to accommodate adults unless they're playground. But they don't have to be. Public spaces can become local hubs of community activities if we populate them with public amenities that appeal to the demographic of our community or target markets. We would certainly expand the possibilities of who might visit and use the space.

2) Add movement and action to public spaces. Unchain the public tables and chairs and allow them to roam free. An amazing thing will happen. The site visitor will arrange them to suit their needs. Which may mean moving the chairs and tables to a shady area, adding or reducing the number of chairs and tables in a cluster based on the visitor using them at that precise moment, or finding alternative uses for them...perhaps using one chair as a table. Bistro type tables and chairs work well in this type of environment.

Add play areas and activity zones for both kids and adults to your public spaces. Adults want to play too, and the kids would really appreciate some programmed activity space. You may have noticed that many restaurants and bars have added play areas or activity zones. These public amenities create both active and passive activities for playing and watching. They also extend the amount of time one remains in an area and invites one to return again and again. Parklets, seatwalls and

circular benches are ideal for these types of areas.

3) Be bold, unique and/or different with your public amenities. Different is good and we live in a selfie-obsessed world. Public amenities that stand out from the crowd will attract a life of their own. Visitors will want to engage with the items through personal test, take selfies of themselves and friends and post them online.

These items may also become local landmarks and points of interest. Local art, artistic site amenities and bike racks are good starting considerations for this category

4) Provide a wide variety of public amenities that will be attractive for a wide range of visitors. Identify the people who will be visiting your site or that you'd like to visit the site, and make it a point to have something for them. As an example, provide public amenities that families will use, along with couples on a date. Create active play scenarios for the toddler and kid so that parents can meet for civil conversions. Let the teenagers be teenagers with amenities that will fulfill their needs. Invite competition between brothers and sisters, boys and girls, sons and fathers, mothers and daughters. And don't forget to provide an amenity or two for Fido.

5) If the location that you're attempting to activate gets plenty of sun during the day, provide shade. Locations without shade are usually void of people. There are artificial trees, natural trees, awnings, open shelters, shade sails and windscreens available to mitigate that situation. Shade is an important element that usually gets overlooked in public spaces.

6) Even places with excellent public amenities sometimes fail. Usually it's because community members haven't had an opportunity to readjust their vision of a location. One way to minimize that risk is to program the place with activities, especially in the early stages of introduction. People are usually attracted to places over time. Programming local activities in the space will provide visitors with a chance to visit the space, create buzz or word of mouth about its location and amenities. It will also give community members and visitors an opportunity to embrace the location as their own.

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