

Building Places

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Public gathering places are vital to community health. These are the places where we bump into each other, meet our neighbours, and connect to the place we live.

Modern U.S. communities may be among the first ever to be built without town squares or commons or central gathering place. Think about the plazas of Italy or the zocalos (town squares) of Mexico – public places filled with activity and vibrancy.

Unintentional encounters happen in intentional places.

We've found that building community gathering spaces is a powerful way to get local people to show up and to teach them practical ways to work together, solve problems and forge a renewed sense of community connection. Our time tested-approach to public space building creates a foundation for healthy community development and can be a critical first step in bringing communities together to work for a healthier, more sustainable future.

Our gathering place model puts residents at the center – they are a critical part of designing, building and stewarding the gathering place. We work with communities, not for them. With this approach, it is not uncommon for our gathering places to have more than 750 hours of community volunteer time contributed to the project. Why is this important? When people help to create a project they are much more likely to use and care for the space they helped to build. We have seen a direct correlation between the number of volunteer hours a community puts into a project and the amount of vandalism that later occurs. Another benefit – being part of a visible, fun, lasting project like building a gathering place inspires all sorts of other actions – communities have started annual festivals, arts groups, block watches and day cares...the list goes on. Communities are capable of so much – our gathering places projects are kick-start to much more community building in communities.

Three case stories are presented:

- Medina Elementary School, Medina, Washington;
- Washington Park, Walla Walla, Washington; and
- Cambie Gathering Place, Richmond, British Columbia.

Each learned the power of designing and creating their own gathering places:

Medina Elementary School, Medina, Washington



Bringing Imagination, color and surprise to a new school building

NEED: It was true that the old school building needed to be torn down – Medina Elementary School was more than 50 years old – and the new building would be bigger and lighter. But the students, parents and alumni were sad about the change, too. The building was filled with character and stories and history. Would a new building have the same feeling? Would it represent this community and the students? Or would it feel stark and standard? The parents, teachers and administrators wanted to make the new building even more special than the one being torn down – a place that would inspire learning, grow with the community and reflect their values.

SOLUTION: Integrating art with education and the new architecture, Pomegranate Center created a plan that would infuse the new school with surprise, color, learning and inspiration.

In the last months before the old school was torn down, Pomegranate Center brought together students, parents and teachers to create special art projects that would be put into the new building. They made an 18'x12' painting of a heron made up of the handprints and fingerprints of all the students and teachers, which hangs in the new school library. And each classroom created a series of large concrete tiles that depicted a story or theme from something they learned that year – the lifecycle of a frog, the five senses, and musical instruments from history. Each series of tiles lives in a street light – made of salvaged I-beams from the old school – leading up to the school. In the back of the school, Pomegranate Center designed a small amphitheatre and stage – the ages of the earth are illustrated on the stage floor. The central school courtyard features a 12'x12' terrazzo “milky way galaxy” – 1 foot equals 5,555 light years. A sundial and reading circle for older students is tucked into the grassy section near the back

Washington Park, Walla Walla, Washington



Adding safety to a misused park – through color, music and dance

NEED: Washington Park is pretty big. It has a soccer field, basketball court and a playground. But one section of the park wasn't being used...at least for its intended purpose. The west side, with large patches of grass and pockets of mature trees, was commonly used for drug deals. This corner of the park butts against a railroad track and, according to local police, this made it a prime corner for planning a quick escape by foot, since a police car couldn't follow. Washington Park serves hundreds of households in a lower-income section of the city. A food bank is just down the road and the Housing Authority offices are across the street. The community wanted to reclaim the park and make it less desirable for the drug dealers.

SOLUTION: Bringing people into the west corner of the park was the first priority. To discover the way to do that, Pomegranate Center, in partnership with Walla Walla-based non-profit Commitment to Community, brought community members together to plan and design park additions that would inspire more community activity and make the park safer. The community agreed on a few important elements – they wanted a place to dance and make music, a promenade that was wide enough for four people to stroll side-by-side, and lots of color.

A few months later, Pomegranate Center staff, Public Space Rangers and volunteers moved into Washington Park, pitching tents a few yards from the future dance floor. For nine days they worked alongside community members and Parks & Recreation staff to turn the community's ideas into reality:

- A stage and dance floor that can easily accommodate 50 couples is surrounded by 22' carved and colourfully stained columns and hand painted banners.
- Two picnic areas, also delineated by carved and stained columns and banners, feature handmade tables and benches made of salvaged black walnut donated by the City.

- An 8' wide walking path encircles the park with handmade black walnut benches placed along the way.
- Over 200 hand-painted pennant banners made by kids and parents from the community wave above the entryway and shelters.

Every night during the building week, local musicians entertained volunteers and community members on the new stage – helping everyone imagine how the space could be used into the future.

OUTCOME: This year's Dia del Ninos celebration will be the first community festival in Washington Park since the stage, dance floor and shelters have been added. Hundreds of children and families are expected for the games, music and dancing, food and piñata marathon (community members have been making piñatas for months). The local college is planning a music festival at the stage, and Parks & Recreation is getting its first requests to hold weddings on the stage under the colourful banners. Local community life is taking hold in Washington Park.

Cambie Gathering Place, Richmond, B.C.



Creating local identity by creating a focal point

NEED: East Richmond is a diverse, mixed-income community. As a popular destination for recent immigrants, you can hear dozens of languages being spoken in most neighbourhoods.

SOLUTION: Creating a focal point for the entire community, built by the community, was a powerful starting point for making this diverse neighbourhood feel more unified. Along with the city government and the East Richmond Community Association and more than 100 community volunteers, Pomegranate Center led the creation of a gathering place at the center of the neighbourhood. An amphitheatre that can seat 150 is nestled into a circular earth mound with paths from three directions leading to the center. Visual elements and materials used speak of

the people and the place – Ocean Pearl stone from Vancouver Island makes the benches, and cedar is used for gateways and posts. An acid-washed concrete floor inlaid with strips of acrylic suggests the regional delta-like landscape. Artistic gateways lead the community into the amphitheatre from the surrounding area.

OUTCOME: The Cambie Gathering Place – a model of cooperation between community members and municipalities – is a very popular gathering place for the whole community. It has been host to summer concerts and community events. A group of volunteers weeds and cleans it annually in preparation for warm weather activities. The space feels like it belongs to and is cared for by the whole community.

For more information about gathering places, please to: <http://www.pomegranatecenter.org/?v=2>