

# How to Become a Great Public Space



**Want to attract more users? Fred Kent and Phil Myrick of the Project for Public Spaces suggest you look to your welcome mat**

In an exclusive interview for *American Libraries*, librarian and e-columnist Marylaine Block ([www.marylaine.com](http://www.marylaine.com)) talked with Fred Kent, founder of the Project for Public Spaces, and Phil Myrick, PPS's assistant vice president, about the yin and yang of transforming libraries into great public spaces—in other words, desirable destinations for citizens looking to mingle, meander, and meditate, as well as to access information.

The Project for Public Spaces ([pps.org](http://pps.org)) is a non-profit organization that offers courses across the United States and abroad on topics such as “How to Turn a Place Around” and “Creating a Sense of Place in Neighborhoods.” PPS also conducts visioning workshops and shows communities how to gather and analyze data, observe activities, conduct interviews, and use research to understand the problems and opportunities inherent in the design of their public spaces and buildings, and to find ways to improve them.

Block, Kent, and Myrick exchanged phone calls and e-mails between January 29 and February 10. The following is a question-and-answer transcript, edited for clarity and length.

**AL: Why should librarians pay attention to your work?**

**MYRICK:** Information is easy to come by these days; good public spaces are not. Increasingly, the stature of libraries will depend on the very fact that they *are* physical places that are centrally located in almost every neighborhood.

Consider changes taking place in many cities and towns. Americans are choosing to live in places that offer convenient services and quick access to work and recreation. The most desirable neighborhoods are lively spaces that provide shops, restaurants,

civic uses, and gathering places in an environment conducive to walking.

And yet public libraries remain on the periphery, despite their potential to become an anchor of community life, even an attraction. True, many libraries *have* evolved into multidimensional public spaces, but they remain internally focused—a community living room, at best. Communities are asking for a different model: a community front porch.

In 1993, PPS asked residents in three different states what would make their libraries more relevant. In scores of public meetings, residents repeatedly spoke of a place where a variety of community activities could take place—connected to, but perhaps independent of, the actual operation of the library. Specific activities envisioned for this space included information centers, gardens and playgrounds, outdoor cafés, and book and craft fairs.

But all shared some common goals: increasing the library's role as a public gathering place in both interior and exterior spaces; making the library an inviting, comfortable, and attractive anchor for the neighborhood; marketing library programs; developing income-generating opportunities to support library activities.

Every community resource has a role in reviving neighborhoods—museums, schools, churches, and especially libraries. In the future, people may

not need to come to the library for its information. But they will come in droves if they perceive it as a desirable place.

**AL: What qualities do people value in public spaces? How do you know?**

**KENT:** Using techniques like time-lapse filming, systematic observation, surveys, and town meetings,

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we've found four qualities. Every great public space has access and linkages, comfort and image, uses and activities, and sociability.

What does this mean in practice? Here's how we've described the New York Public Library as a great public space on our Web site:

**Access and linkages:** There is easy subway access. A wide bank of shallow steps along Fifth Avenue welcomes people up to the main entrance and a large "front-porch" area spans the width of the building; there's also a well-marked door on 42nd Street. Pathways lead from the front and sides of the building around to the lovely Bryant Park in back, and also provide handicapped access.

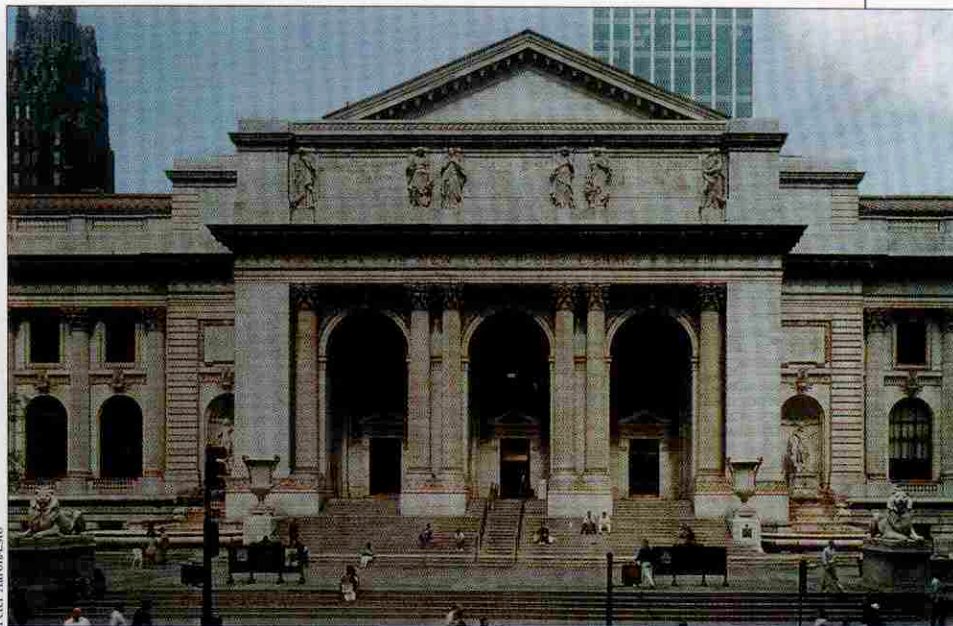
**Comfort and image:** This sumptuous building seems to equate intellectual riches with luxury, with loads of marble, brass, and carved wood inside, and stately paths, steps, and benches outside. There are also plenty of tables and chairs outside (and one need not purchase food to use them). The lions flanking the main steps have become city icons and are decorated for holidays and special events. Lush landscaped areas adjacent to the sidewalk provide a bit of a buffer and welcome greenery in a district where concrete and asphalt dominate.

**Uses and activities:** In addition to books and all other forms of information, the library organizes and hosts an array of exhibits. Outside, two large food kiosks draw substantial crowds even in chilly weather. And, of course, there are the steps, a favorite spot for meeting, and for people-watching.

**Sociability:** NYPL seems to draw as many eaters and people-watchers as readers and researchers. Although few people seem to know each other (this is midtown Manhattan, after all), there is a palpable sense of goodwill and well-being that comes from the welcoming surroundings. Even loners and loiterers seem becalmed.

**AL: What are some other great library buildings and what are they doing right?**

**MYRICK:** The Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon, is linked to everything around it: The streets are easy to cross, with narrow lanes and bricked crosswalks; there is a tram stop right alongside, as well as bike racks; it's a beautiful historic structure with front steps that serve as a place to gather; and it's right up on the sidewalk, rather than being set back. Everything about it says to the passerby that the library is engaged with the



Peter Aaron/Esto

**NYPL's front steps double as an urban front porch. Right: Toronto's Beaches branch and a neighborhood park make perfect partners.**



city and is a convenient, important destination.

Inside, wonderful attention is given to making users comfortable and providing useful services. Programs are creative and extensive, and there's a coffee vendor inside one of the reading rooms. The renovation itself is also spectacular, along with sensitive use of public art.

But that's less important. It works well because of all these other aspects, most of which are inexpensive (coffee vending), and things most libraries consider outside their purview but which are really critical, like the crosswalks outside. The result is one of the friendliest libraries I've ever seen.

The Beaches branch library in Toronto also does a great job of bridging the adjoining neighborhood park to the sidewalk. The instant you see it, you know it's one of the important social places for the neighborhood, because they've used what PPS calls triangulation—the putting together of three or more things to



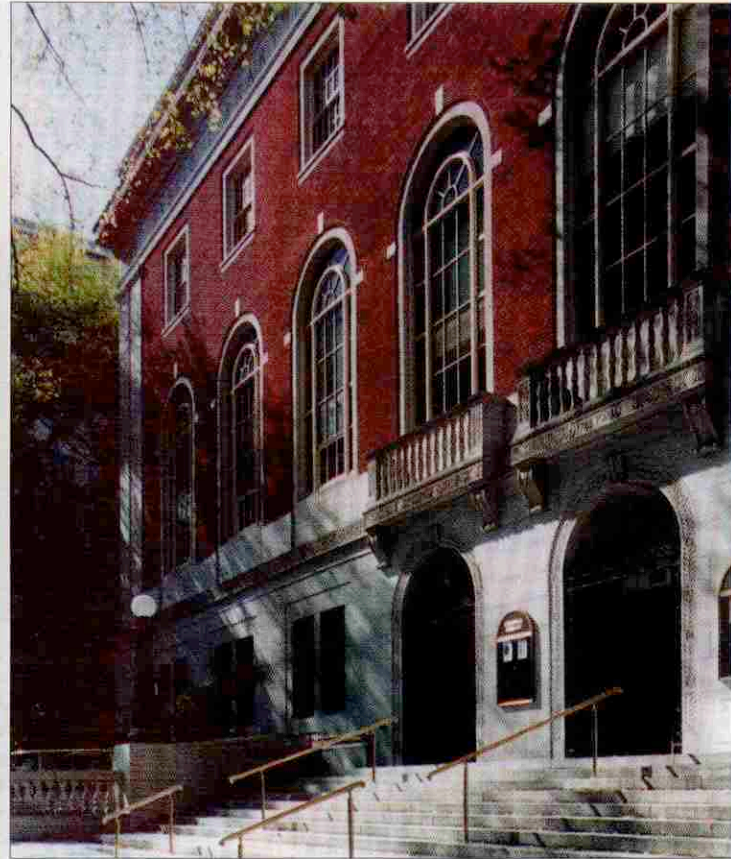
Fred Wilson

create a people-friendly environment.

You can't just stick a bench in the ground and expect people to use it, any more than you can plant one flower and expect to attract butterflies. At the Beaches branch, benches of different kinds are placed around a welcome sign that's next to some pay phones and a community bulletin board. In addition, it's right on the sidewalk, an integral part of the nice shopping street that's on a comfortable scale for pedestrians. The park attracts still another audience.

**AL: What do you think is the first thing library directors should do when planning an expansion or a new building?**

**KENT:** Don't think about the building first. Start with desired uses. Hold community meetings to find out what activities the residents would like access to, and then think about how to combine those uses. Encourage young people to participate. Teens can be valuable community builders; one of our Web pages ([www.pps.org/tcb/index.html](http://www.pps.org/tcb/index.html)) shows successful collaborations, including the Burton Barr Central Library, a teen center inside Phoenix's central downtown library designed and run with the help of teens.



**Multnomah County (Oreg.) Library's verdant children's area echoes the friendly, leaf-lined motif of the entrance.**

What happens when you start with buildings, not uses? In one of the places I've been consulting, there are two new public buildings. They're beautiful, but there's no connection between them—no playground, no flowers, no benches, just a vast expanse of grass. I saw a woman coming out of one of these buildings and loading her children into the car, and I asked her what she planned to do next. She wanted to have a glass of iced tea, buy some milk, pick up some picture books for the kids. And she had to drive to every one of those chores, hauling the kids in and out of the car in 110-degree heat. Her life would have been so much easier if more of those necessary functions were located together.

**MYRICK:** Start by understanding that the future of libraries lies in making them a place where people want to be.

This depends on a city's public and private sectors understanding how public libraries can anchor the community, and the role they can play in meeting many needs. Greater community involvement can build support for new library programs and policies, and strengthen the library's role as a civic gathering place and stimulus for neighborhood revitalization. Design workshops with residents can flesh out how to bring more of the library's

offerings outside and into view, rather than burying these assets in vaults and basement classrooms.

**AL: Can a renovated or brand-new central library building help restore a dying downtown?**

**KENT:** A library by itself won't draw people to an area that has nothing else interesting going on. Again, you can't start with the building. You ask what uses and activities people want; only then do you ask what kinds of physical support those uses require.

**Library space designed as part of a larger public space makes the library more than just a library.**

Cities have designed things so that people can't have a good experience walking even 300 feet. If you design multiple functions all together, people will walk. A library is not just a research center but a place for community. Think of your library like the major department store anchoring a mall. There

should be commercial and civic space nearby—maybe even a laundromat.

Imagine someone putting their clothes in the washing machines and then taking the kids to story hour, or browsing through the new books, or getting a snack in the library coffee shop, or sitting on the front steps enjoying the birds and flowers and chatting with people, while the machines do their thing. Public spaces are opportunities for sociability.

**KENT:** When you enter a public space, you're making yourself available for chance meetings, conversations, maybe even flirtations. Just simple eye contact and smiles between strangers make people feel better about themselves and the world. Watch how people come together at farmers' markets and street festivals. We are longing for the opportunity to stroll in public. By designing your physical space so that the library is part of a larger public space, you don't take away from the library; you make it more than just a library.

**AL: What do you think about grand, high-vaulted rooms in libraries, like the Wintergarden in Chicago's Harold Washington Library or the Tsakopoulos Galleria in the Sacramento Public Library, which can be rented for meetings and special occasions?**

**KENT:** This seems like an idea that starts with the building first rather than with uses. Maybe there's some need for grand public spaces, but they don't necessarily complement a library.

The Tsakopoulos Galleria seems to have no use apart from specific programming; it doesn't connect to other places. Real gallerias, like the one in Milan, or the Cleveland Arcade, are like lively streets, with

stores and offices and food and places to sit and watch people passing by. Because they're located centrally, people use them as shortcuts to get from one place to another, while looking at interesting, ever-changing things along the way. These are the kinds of spaces that could complement a library's books and information.

**AL: Do you see any drawbacks in terms of public funding when libraries add revenue-generating facilities?**

**MYRICK:** You'd need a clear written agreement with your funding agency, differentiating core library functions to be met with tax dollars from specific additional services to be funded by profits from commercial space.

**AL: Many librarians have responded to the problem of homeless people by reducing comfortable seating and amenities. Can we keep library buildings appealing despite having taken such drastic actions?**

**MYRICK:** While touring the Toronto library system, we saw a man sweeping the sidewalk in front of a downtown branch. He pointed out to my guide several repairs that needed to be made, and recommended installing security cameras to control undesirable behavior during off hours. It turned out that this caretaker was a homeless man himself who slept every night on the bench next to the front door. He was recommending cameras that would mostly be filming him! So, it's possible to work cooperatively and treat homeless people as their own special constituency group.

The easier strategy is this: Create the kind of social scenes that exist in those Portland and Toronto libraries, and people will have an overwhelmingly positive memory of that place. Homeless people may be there, but they prefer out-of-the-way corners, avoiding the social scene. You haven't solved the problem, but you've won the most important battle: how people perceive this place.

Libraries could be an active catalyst for revitalizing their communities. They could even regularly convene residents to imagine, plan, or design the future of their community. The opportunity is all the more pronounced when one considers that many of the libraries built in the boom of the 1950s are crumbling and need major renovation.

It's a historic opportunity. Librarians with vision should seize it. ♦

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