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## Places

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## Common Places: Finding a Framework Todd W. Bressi

Common places are woven into our cities and our lives in a variety of ways. Some are incidental, like a riverfront cafe that we discover with delight. Others are casual, like the neighborhood playgrounds that anchor children's routines and social networks. Still others are monumental, like the civic parks or cultural institutions that we visit only occasionally, but with anticipation or even fanfare. Such places are most effective when they are anchored within a framework — a system of infrastructure like streets or rivers, a network of public institutions like schools, or a set of civic expectations. These frameworks help determine which places become lodged within our experience of and image of the city, which places receive the attention they need to thrive, which places are carried forward in visions for the future.

Like San Francisco (which the RUDC visited last spring), Chicago is making vast investments in its common places. The fall forum in Chicago explored a range of common places — through tours and presentations by designers, public officials and community leaders — always searching for the frameworks that fix the position of these places in the city, in citizens' everyday lives, and in people's expectations.

### Streets as Common Places

Downtown, State Street is undergoing a remarkable revival. A century ago, it embodied the best of this brawny metropolis, emerging as a choice location for wondrous new skyscrapers, shopping palaces and civic life. But after World War II it began to decline. Suburban growth competed for retail and office activity; its architectural landmarks were becoming functionally obsolescent; local businesses that had proudly viewed State Street as a front door were being acquired by remote owners. In 1979, the street was turned into a busway.

Two frameworks have been essential to State Street's revival: the history embedded in its architecture and in people's memories, and civic groups that have refused to let it die. The planning and design strategies have rested on several principles, which generally seek to recognize the complexity of the street and activities along it, and to strengthen connections to businesses, institutions and other common places downtown:

*Make a mixed-use street.* The busway was reconfigured to handle both bus and auto traffic; sidewalk space was reduced to concentrate pedestrian activity next to buildings; subway connections were emphasized with new entrance kiosks; space was reserved for a possible downtown light-rail connector.

*Cultivate a variety of activities along the street.* Entertainment, retail and educational uses already anchor three distinct segments and generate activity at least eighteen hours a day. Planners hope for more housing, which could give State Street life around the clock; already, several buildings have been converted to student housing and live-work lofts.

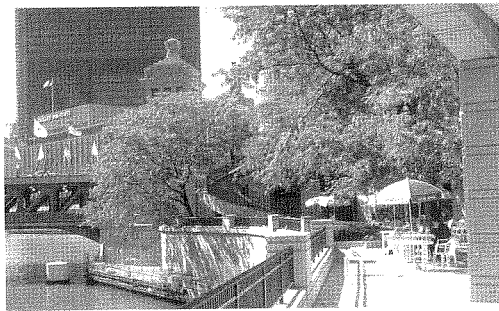
*Establish ownership.* "Who's minding the store?" asked Gregory S. Baldwin, FAIA, of Zimmer Gunsul Frasca. When State Street was a bus mall, the perception was that it belonged to Chicago's transit authority; now a civic group, the Greater State Street Council, has taken clear leadership in managing the street.

State Street must still anchor itself more firmly into surrounding frameworks. First, it must integrate better with the downtown street network. Cross streets should serve as gate-

ways, and the connection to North Michigan Avenue (two blocks east) via walkways along the Chicago River could be improved. Second, it must connect better, architecturally, to activities in buildings along it; recent projects like the Chicago Theatre renovation and the DePaul Center (which includes retail and educational space) are improving matters. Third, finding new uses for mothballed buildings while conserving their historic qualities is essential for maintaining the memories that have sustained interest in the street.

“State Street brings back a heartbeat and feeling for the city, a whole new concept about what city life should be,” Chicago Mayor Richard Daley told the forum. “Now we are applying the same idea to small retail streets throughout the city that also went through decline.”

Indeed, other projects are exploring how local streets can be common grounds for the communities they serve. The reconstruction of the Sunnyside pedestrian mall, in Uptown, involved installing new lighting, street furniture and art to make the mall more engaging. But the biggest accomplishment was reconciling the interests of the two communities that shared the space yet distrusted each other, and creating a civic framework that would take care of the mall, according to Monique Barwicki, of the city’s cultural affairs agency.



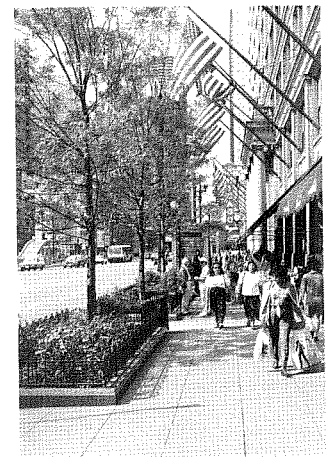
Another project involves 35th Street, a struggling commercial strip that links historically Black Bronzeville and the Illinois Institute of Technology, and will be the site of Chicago’s new police headquarters. A joint IIT – Harvard studio examined how this investment, coupled with the community’s ambition to be a center for African-American culture and tourism, could change the street. The studio staged charrettes involving nearly twenty community groups and offered site-specific proposals for shops, jazz clubs, a hotel and small public spaces.

The plan served as “a motivator and inspirer,” architecture professor Dirk Denison noted, and is one of several projects exploring how IIT and Bronzeville can forge a common vision for neighborhood revitalization. “Now we need a plan for building community from a capacity point of view,” community leader Carroll Lucas said. “How do we build our ability to advance this agenda?”

### Regional Landscape as a Framework

Chicago’s regional landscape – Lake Michigan, the forests and the prairies – has long been a powerful inspiration and anchor for the city’s common places. “The idea of lakefront park has been deeply implanted in Chicago” since the federal government gave the city lakefront land in the 1840s, observed Lawrence Okrent.

Indeed, Grant Park, where the Loop meets Lake Michigan, has been a work in progress since then. Chicago Park District director Edward Uhlir, FAIA, described how it has inched



Left: Recently opened riverfront cafe. (Todd W. Bressi)  
Above: State Street.  
(© Steinkamp/Ballogg Chicago)

forward through a series of breakwater and fill projects, deals with railroads and legal battles, not to mention visionary plans. Now the goal is to connect Grant Park north past the Illinois Center to Navy Pier, and south to Burnham Park and Northerly Island. This three-mile chain will link a range of gathering places serving the entire region: Navy Pier's promenade, beer gardens and exhibition halls; Grant Park's marina and green; event facilities like Soldier Field and McCormick Place; and institutions like the Art Institute, Field Museum of Natural History, Shedd Aquarium and Adler Planetarium.

The southward connection has been facilitated by the recent relocation of Lakeshore Drive, a high-speed arterial. Burnham Park is likely to change dramatically when the park district closes Meigs Field (an airstrip built on the site of the 1933-34 World's Fair). The district has proposed creating a "museum campus" with spaces and programming related to natural science themes.

Filling in this lakefront framework will require careful compromise, several presenters acknowledged. Cultural institutions are growing and becoming more entrepreneurial, straining their historic buildings and settings, aquarium planner Daniel Bluestone noted. The park district is also programming facilities like Soldier Field more aggressively to keep them from losing money. Access, parking and expansion space are critical; but citizen groups are demanding more green space, and Lakeshore Drive and rail lines inhibit east-west pedestrian and transit connections.

Chicago is also beginning to use its regional landscape as a framework for common places at a local scale. Like many cities, Chicago is rediscovering its riverfront, in large part because improvements to sanitary and stormwater treatment systems have improved water quality. In 1991, the city adopted downtown riverfront design guidelines, requiring projects to set back from the water and provide amenities.

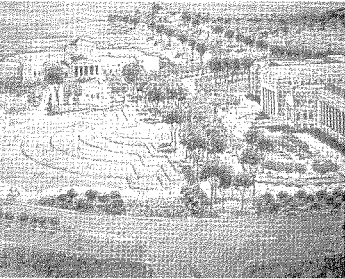
Some changes have occurred already, including a waterfront cafe at one new hotel. City planner Joseph Zehnder described six more projects — including cafes, docks, fishing platforms and street-end plazas — that could be built with city funds or through development agreements. Planners are also working on guidelines for the entire 41-mile river, including public access requirements in industrial and shopping areas better connections to the river where it passes through regional forest reserves.

### Plans as Frameworks

Chicago offers a powerful example of how a planning vision can serve as a framework for the evolution of common places. Daniel H. Burnham's 1909 plan is still a fundamental reference point for many projects, even though the city's physical structure and economic and social composition have changed dramatically since then. Just as important, the city seems imbued with a can-do spirit, which is exemplified by Mayor Daley's insistence on making public works projects accountable to the public.

A convincing case of this is the evolution of North Michigan Avenue. In Burnham's day it was an ordinary street in a tenement zone, but he proposed turning it into a grand boulevard, both to connect the Loop to the north lakefront and to establish property value. "Burnham thought Michigan Avenue would be a great street, and Jules Guerin drew it with trees, commotion, people, bustle," explained Howard Decker, FAIA; indeed, as State Street declined, it emerged as Chicago's premier shopping and architectural address.

Despite the persistence of Burnham's vision, the city clearly needs to establish new planning frameworks. Chicago's streets, boulevards, lakefront and river serve as powerful elements of urban form and armatures for common places, but the city needs something more. For example, Bronzeville's Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, part of a boulevard system designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, received a \$10.5 million spruce up with new

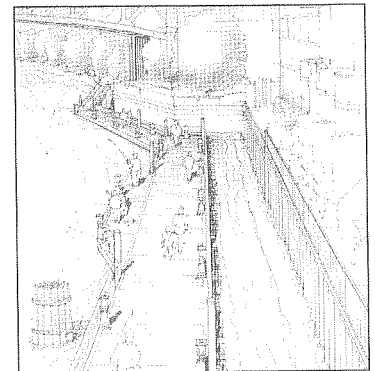
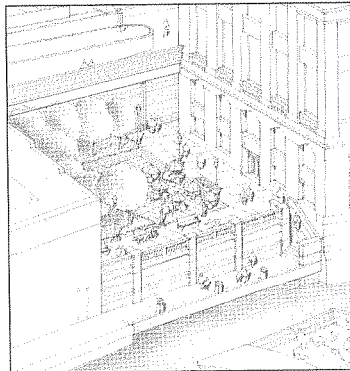


"Museum forecourt" connecting Grant Park and Burnham Park, showing the Shedd Aquarium (left), Field Natural History Museum (right) and terraces that are now under construction; Teng and Associates. (Chicago Park District)

landscaping and public art. Yet the street is primarily a regional traffic artery, while 35th Street, which crosses the boulevard struggles to emerge as a framework for community life.

Another issue is a lack of useful open space. Two-thirds of Chicagoans live in areas where parks are too crowded or too far away, and the city's open space system has neither kept up with recreation demands nor managed to set aside sufficient habitat for plants and animals. Consequently, Chicago is actively adding to its public open space inventory, thanks in part to \$1 billion in funding from a city bond issue.

Chicago's CitySpace Project, begun in 1993, includes initiatives to revive decrepit playgrounds, turn vacant lots into parks and develop riverfront open space. For example, eighty percent of the city's 557 schools have land that is in bad shape or severely underused, according to planner Patricia Gallagher; the project seeks to create 100 new parks at schools. The project also seeks to establish organizational and funding frameworks to ensure new parks can be maintained. The opportunism and local scale inherent in each intervention make this important plan quite different from Burnham's grand vision, yet it is probably more appropriate for our time.



#### Common Places: Directions for Investigation

This year's forums concentrated on two broad themes — how common spaces are addressing increasingly complicated agendas, and how they are connected to a city's physical frameworks, social networks and expectations for itself. The forums also raised several issues for further consideration.

The forums focused largely on common places in central cities. What types of common spaces, and what frameworks, are relevant at the metropolitan scale? Even in cases where regional frameworks exist, such as rail systems in the Bay Area or Chicagoland, or the trails that encircle the bay and ridgelines in the Bay Area, how are the local and regional scales mediated in urban design and architecture?

The forums generally addressed common places that exist within an urban texture, such as downtowns or older, denser neighborhoods. At least two other textures are equally relevant — the campus and the suburb. The forums examined, all too briefly, how campuses like Levi's corporate headquarters and the Yerba Buena Gardens cultural center were integrated into San Francisco's grid, and Don Miles, FAIA, described the meshing of Los Angeles' Exposition Park with the surrounding city.

The forums tended to focus on places that are traditionally public, such as streets and parks. Yet more and more common places — coffee shops, health clubs, bookstores, shopping malls — are not explicitly public. How can planners and designers knit these all into a diverse landscape of common places? Can common places be linked not only to public institutions but also to civic groups and nonprofit organizations, which are assuming an increasingly important role in civil society?

The shifting roles of common places, and the complex ways in which they are becoming embedded in our communities, pose countless design questions. It may still be true that one must pay for the public life, but the opportunities for cultivating common ground seem richer, more challenging and more laden with potential than one would first imagine.

— Todd W. Bressi is Executive Editor of *Places* and teaches urban design at Pratt Institute.

Proposals for new downtown waterfront public space.  
Left: Rush Street Park.  
Right: North Beach Boardwalk.  
Wolff Clements and Associates.  
(Chicago Department of Planning and Development)

This article reports on the fall, 1997, forum of the American Institute of Architects' Regional and Urban Design Committee, held September 25-28 in Chicago. The forum was organized by Phil Enquist, AIA (Skidmore Owings Merrill LLP), Monique Barwicki (Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs) and Kevin Pierce, AIA (Lohan Associates). Join RUDC and the AIA Committees on Design and Housing for a joint spring forum, Celebration and Central Florida: Cross Sections in Time and Space, February 19-22, 1998. For more information, call 800-242-3837.

