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CALIFORNIA WASTES ITS PUBLIC SPACE

by Howard Kozloff 08/14/2009



California's favorable climate makes it a haven for outdoor activity. Enlightened and forward-looking planning has largely preserved the waterfronts for public access and set aside a lot of space for public use and activity. Yet despite this, there are few great urban gathering spaces. This is most obvious in the two largest population centers – Los Angeles and San Francisco.

As a result, potentially great urban districts are dragged down by a dearth of desirable activity, something exacerbated by an already damaging real estate slump.

Although all is not lost in these cities, some of the most high profile public spaces fail to attract large numbers of visitors on a daily basis, particularly when no special events are planned.

Pershing Square, Los Angeles – Located in the heart of downtown, Pershing Square is poorly designed, both as its own project and in a contextual sense. In an already warm climate made even hotter by its CBD location, there is too much hardscape. Extensive softscape, whether flowers, grass, and/or trees, would provide a cooling effect. There are also too many symbolic structures serving no purpose. These are expensive to install and maintain; they provide very little benefit. Also, an already bad relationship to the street was made worse by restricting access points and hiding the interior space. Although some changes over the past several years have softened the space somewhat, it still lacks some basic creature comforts, such as adequate lighting and clean restrooms, to make it a daily destination for the scores of office workers within easy walking distance.

County Mall, Los Angeles – County Mall, located west of Los Angeles City Hall between Broadway and Grand Avenue, is in the unenviable position of being relatively unknown. Poor graphics and signage do little to improve its profile. Although there was extensive softscape in the design, many of the original shrubs and flowers have eroded. Further, the large space is not properly organized to allow and encourage different types of activity. Adjacent uses alone are not enough to sustain the park. Unlike in Pershing Square, the design here is not the primary issue. Instead, more programming and better maintenance would make County Mall successful, and provide for a dramatic promenade connecting City Hall and the Los Angeles Music Center.



Union Square, San Francisco – Despite an expensive redesign nearly five years ago, Union Square is still not the central urban gathering space for San Francisco. Although it does serve as an incidental focus of pedestrian activity within

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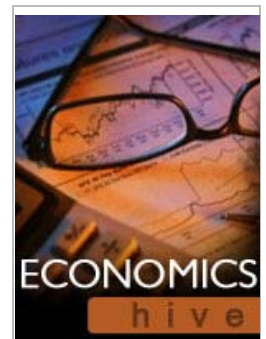
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seating is poorly designed, intended to prevent homeless use rather than to promote use by casual park visitors. Primarily a concrete space with grass at the corners, Union Square lacks the "warmth" that makes such spaces comfortable. Imagine a Union Square with a great lawn in the middle, rather than cold (and expensive) hardscape.

the immediate neighborhood, the primarily hardscaped design is too fussy and too formal to encourage casual passive use and extended stays, except, perhaps, within limited zones at the fringes. The little available



Market Street, San Francisco – Punctuated by intermittent triangular plazas along most of its downtown stretches, portions of Market Street's public space are more the domain of homeless panhandlers than workers, residents, strollers, and the like (it should be noted, however, that some parts of Market Street, such as in the Financial District, can be pleasant at times). The plazas, quality architecture, and mix of uses create potential. But the pedestrian environment

discourages extended dwell times, except by the homeless, panhandlers and drug dealers, many of whom, the city has documented, commute daily to Market Street from elsewhere in the Bay Area. The design offers little in the way of seating options and softscape. Sanitation and maintenance need to be substantially upgraded and programming is needed.



what visionary management can do to struggling urban public spaces. [Kozloff worked for BRV Corp., Biederman's private consulting company that is independent of the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation, from 2001-2004.] Although once run on a city budget of \$200,000, Bryant Park is now managed on a privately-funded budget. Biederman turned Bryant Park – once the domain of drug dealers and other such undesirables – into Manhattan's premier address without using public coffers.

Given the warm weather, long growing seasons, and urban renaissance occurring in adjacent portions of Los Angeles and San Francisco, even in the midst of our current downturn, there are opportunities to improve the public realm so that it serves its intended purpose, including

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boosting civic pride and, in turn, encouraging public stewardship. And, these improvements could be made without costly redesigns and extensive capital construction. Urban environments do not need places that drain public funds and then are shunned by the citizenry; there are enough other issues for urban mayors to deal with. Great cities need comfortable and inviting gathering places that both anchor and bolster civic pride, and simultaneously provide backdrops for special events and day-to-day activity.

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