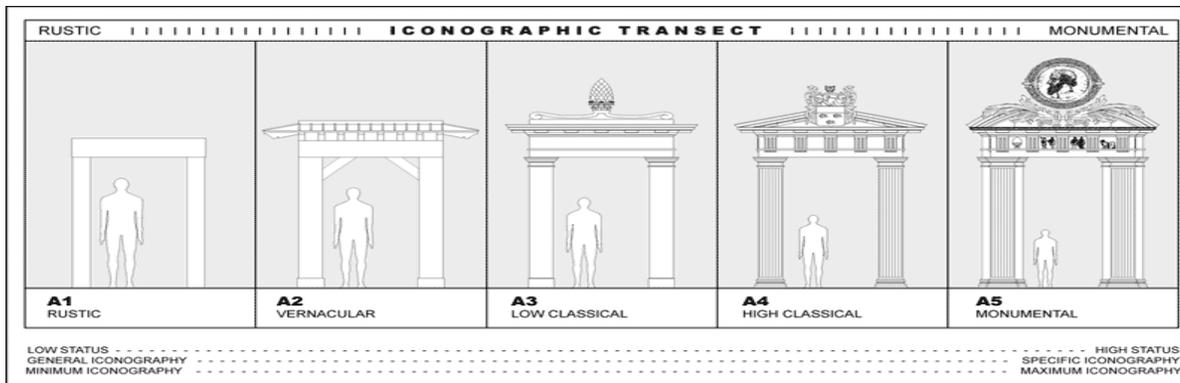


## Pattern 6: Public Places

"The cities that we love so much today – Rome, Venice, Prague, St. Petersburg, Charleston – also evince a coherence with respect to the appearance of buildings. What is needed is a tool that allows us to analyze and prescribe this coherence."

– Dino Marcantonio, Univ. of Notre Dame



From the Highlands to the Pinelands, every New Jersey community is unique, shaped by a distinct sense of history and purpose that has been cultivated over the decades by the people who call that place home. Yet in many places, recent building patterns have transformed a diverse architectural, natural, and cultural landscape into a bland pattern of suburban sprawl with no special character or sense of community. Creating distinctive public places, or reclaiming those that have been allowed to languish, can do much to strengthen community character and identity.

## Mobility and Community Form Principles

Four key principles define mobility-friendly planning for public places:

- Monumentality,
- Visibility and Framing,
- Civic Cluster, and
- Placemaking.

### *Monumentality:*

*Use a scale and formality appropriate to community context to determine design characteristics of streets, plazas and public buildings.*

Central public places provide a location for a wide range of community political events, ceremonies and recreation. Public places can be grand and celebratory, such as the Capitol Mall in Washington D.C., or they can be simple, even rustic, such as a flagpole or a statue in a small plaza or patch of green. The type, size and architecture of public buildings, the size and formality of parks and plazas, the width of streets and height of street trees all contribute to the unique sense of a public place.

Dino Marcantonio, an architecture professor at Notre Dame, built on the idea of the transect (which takes a “plan” view of geography) to create the concept of an “iconographic transect”, which considers the “monumentality” or “built scale” of a place as an additional measure of context. Very simply, smaller or less formal places should present a design and scale message that is in keeping with that size or function. Larger, central or more important public places should “show off” with a grander scale and architectural language. Marcantonio illustrated this concept with the five-category “iconographic transect” shown at the top of



The War Memorial in Trenton was once the centerpiece of a large Olmsted designed park. It is now surrounded by roadways and parking, but could again become a centerpiece of downtown Trenton if Route 29 is reconstructed as a commercial boulevard.

this chapter. (The illustration, of doorway surrounds, is not about architectural styles, but about scale and formality or ornamentation.)



**A clock and small plaza form the centerpiece of a small village center.**

Thus, a main street in a town would likely be wider than surrounding local streets, framed with more massive and perhaps more highly ornamented buildings, and include the largest or most formal plaza or monument as a focal element. Similarly, the central place of a hamlet might consist of a fully improved intersection (curbs, sidewalk) with a four-way stop, framed by small commercial buildings set at or near the street property lines.



**Steps for the Foxtrot Weave  
Enliven a sidewalk.**

***Visibility and Framing:***

***Make parks, plazas and courtyards visible from adjacent streets.***

***Use transportation features to frame and connect public places.***

Parks and plazas work best when they are clearly visible from surrounding streets or sidewalks. Visibility creates awareness and identity for public places, encouraging use. It also provides natural surveillance, helping to deter crime. Pathways or trails into a park should be designed to help orient users and to help them find their way out as well.



**“A good plaza starts at the street corner. If it’s a busy corner, it has a brisk social life of its own. People will not just be waiting there for the light to change. Some will be fixed in conversation; others, in some phase of a prolonged goodbye.” --William H. Whyte**



**This plaza ties together the new Princeton Public Library with nearby shops, restaurants and housing. Both the interior and exterior spaces serve as popular community gathering places.**

In communities of all types, successful public places tend to be heavily used. Sociologists have documented that when people are out in public places, they enjoy being around other people. The presence of crowds of people of all ages and backgrounds is a sign of life and of a successful place and should not be looked upon as a nuisance. In her 1961 book *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs theorized that it is having “eyes on the street” – the stewardship and watchful eyes of neighbors looking out for places they love – which makes places safe. Ideally, a successful public space should be active for 18 or more hours per day, beginning with the passage of the earliest commuters and continuing with eating or entertainment until late at night.

Conversely, vehicles should be kept out of plazas, parks, and places that function as such. When cars occupy a space, they monopolize it.



This plaza is actually the median of a shopping street in a California mixed use community. In addition to being highly visible from the street, hundreds of residences overlook the plaza. It is so popular that residents sit on their upper story balconies to watch the street life.

**“Cars are happiest when there are no other cars around. People are happiest when there are other people around.” – Dan Burden**

In addition to choosing visible locations for parks and other public places, communities can use transportation features to “frame” and connect them. Framing means utilizing transportation elements to create a sense of place in a somewhat confined area, thereby generating a specific image for community identification. In dense areas, framing can be achieved with long boulevards that lead to a central building or monument. Philadelphia’s Benjamin Franklin Parkway, which stretches from the historic City Hall to the monumental Art Museum and is lined with trees and flags, is an example of a piece of infrastructure that



**Street trees and benches elevate this plain sidewalk into a public place that encourages users to sit, linger, study, or socialize.**

moves cars and also creates a strong sense of place. Several cities in New Jersey have created linear parks along major entryways. For example, in Camden, a new public park along the Admiral Wilson Boulevard helped to transform this roadway into a gateway to the city. A boulevard concept has also been proposed for Route 29 in Trenton.

Transit stations can also serve as focal points

for surrounding public spaces. The design of stations and surrounding areas should create a sense of arrival for passengers and an immediate connection to the life of the place. Bike paths, greenways and scenic pull-off areas can also complement and provide access to adjoining parks. All towns can make use of landscaping, pathways and trails, parking areas, sidewalks, and streets to create pedestrian linkages and enhance civic life.

**“A successful space is easy to get to and get through; it is visible both from a distance and up close.”**

**--Project for Public Spaces**



**This small plaza in Red Bank creates a sense of enclosure, inviting pedestrians to linger.**

### *Civic Cluster:*

*Group civic and institutional buildings with pedestrian plazas or parks to create access to shared civic space.*

Another time-tested element of community form is the grouping of major civic buildings around a town square or village green. Clusters of public buildings (often mixed with shops, private offices, places of worship and hotels) provide for a stronger civic identity and enable several errands to be carried out with one short trip, whether on foot, by automobile or other modes. The design of a central public space may range from the formality of a public garden or courtyard, with fountains and ceremonial sculpture, to a casual lawn with a bandshell for summer performances. A civic cluster is a natural location for a transit stop, which should be well connected to the buildings by pedestrian pathways. In a rural village, the municipal building, post office, firehouse, and local school can be grouped with connecting areas of parkland or a community playground.

Throughout our history, civic buildings—such as city halls, libraries, court houses, schools, and post offices—have served an important function in expressing the character of a place. When civic buildings are grouped in a central location, the space becomes an area that promotes the exchange of information and civic awareness. It provides a space for formal and informal public events and fosters interaction of people of all ages. Semi-public facilities such as community theaters, social service organizations, YMCAs and recreational spaces can be included in these groupings.



**Belvidere, a small town on the Delaware River, is the county seat of Warren County and home to this charming County Park designed in the 1820s. The County Court House and Public Library front the green, and children still use the trees as bases when they play baseball.**

Some municipalities already have a distinct, historic downtown, complete with a town hall, public library, post office, high school, and other prominent civic buildings. In such cases, it is important that land use and transportation plans be conducted with these valuable resources in mind, preserving their place in the community rather than replacing them with new facilities sited in a more remote part of town that is only accessible by automobile. Those municipalities without an historic civic cluster can consider gradual steps to form one, as they choose locations for new facilities such as libraries, schools, or borough halls. As Belvidere and other colonial era examples show, a vision eloquently articulated can remain a community focal point for hundreds of years.



**Red Bank Catholic High School, in Red Bank Borough, and the Post Office in Rocky Hill are good examples of educational and civic buildings serving as backdrops to street life. While it is not always possible to build new civic buildings like these, it is important that communities that are already home to downtown institutions ensure that they are preserved and remain vital parts of the community.**

## ***Placemaking:***

***Provide wide sidewalks or pedestrian paths with places to sit. Provide shade from the heat and warmth on cool days. Allow people to customize spaces in small ways, to give them “ownership.”***

A number of features make for successful public spaces—those that are well used and enjoyed. In addition to convenient, accessible and secure locations and vigilant maintenance of the space, comfortable places to sit are very important. For easy access, benches or chairs can be located along pedestrian pathways. Be sure to consider the needs of elderly, disabled and wheelchair bound persons in designing seating areas. Interesting elements, such as fountains, sculptures, gardens, playgrounds, and overlooks, can become destinations that help to make a place distinctive. A park or plaza may also incorporate and frame an historic site, museum, natural area or wildlife preserve. Smaller “pocket parks” can enhance almost any type of building or streetscape, including workplaces, hospitals, and shopping districts.



**Public outdoor rooms with tables for talking, reading, or eating lunch work well in cities and towns alike. At the left, all of the chairs and tables can be moved to suit the purposes of users. In the right photo, the seating is fixed, but benches line the enclosing walls, and the wall tops themselves provide prime seating – with a view!**



The orientation of buildings and spaces to the sun should be a primary consideration in designing public spaces. In addition to allowing solar access for heating and cooling, proper design will ensure that plazas receive sunlight for at least part of the day. If food service is available nearby, consider that many people can be attracted to plazas and parks for outdoor eating. Plan a variety of seating, tables, sun and shade spots, and accessories such as trash receptacles accordingly. Use deciduous trees, which provide shade during hot summer months, but allow sunlight to penetrate during the winter.

Studies conducted by William Whyte in the 1970s show that people love to “customize” space as a way of “taking ownership”, if even for a short while. One of the easiest ways to accommodate this is by providing moveable seats: chairs and light weight benches that are not fixed to the ground. Even if it is perfectly situated to take advantage of whatever sun or shade there is, most people will move a chair, at least a few inches, before sitting down. Moveable chairs can also be rearranged to accommodate groups of various sizes.

**“The 20th Century was about getting around. The 21st Century will be about staying in a place worth staying in.”**

– James Howard Kunstler



Flags and banners--such as these in Hoboken, Asbury Park, and Lambertville--help create a civic identity in public places.

Highlighting unique history and cultural traditions is another way towns can emphasize a sense of place. State Scenic Byways, such as the Delaware Valley Scenic Byway and Millstone Valley Byway, emphasize the scenic, cultural, and historic features of a corridor that are worthy of preservation and celebration. The proposed Crossroads of the American Revolution National Heritage Area seeks to draw attention to the significant role New Jersey's communities—such as Trenton, Princeton, and Morristown—played in the Revolutionary War.

## Resources for Public Places

American Planning Association. [www.planning.org](http://www.planning.org)

Context Sensitive Solutions Resource Center. [www.contextsensitivesolutions.org](http://www.contextsensitivesolutions.org)

*Designing New Jersey*. New Jersey Office of State Planning, 2000.

*How to Turn a Place Around: A Handbook for Creating Successful Public Spaces*. Project for Public Spaces, 2000.

Municipal Land Use Center. The College of New Jersey. [www.tcnj.edu/~mluc/](http://www.tcnj.edu/~mluc/)

New Jersey Future. [www.njfuture.org](http://www.njfuture.org)

New Jersey Office of Smart Growth. [www.nj.gov/dca/osg](http://www.nj.gov/dca/osg)

New Jersey Smart Growth Gateway. [www.smartgrowthgateway.org](http://www.smartgrowthgateway.org)

Project for Public Spaces. [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)

Smart Growth America. [www.smartgrowthamerica.org](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org)

Smart Growth Network. [www.smartgrowth.org](http://www.smartgrowth.org)

*The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, William H. Whyte, Conservation Foundation, 1980

Urban Land Institute. [www.uli.org](http://www.uli.org)

Victoria Transport Policy Institute. British Columbia, Canada. [www.vtppi.org](http://www.vtppi.org)