



THE ORIGIN OF THE POWER OF 10

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POWER OF 10 WHAT IS PLACEMAKING PUBLIC BUILDINGS



Early in 2004 we were asked by Mimi Gates, director of the Seattle Art Museum, to review plans for a new wing of the building. PPS President Fred Kent and Senior Vice President Kathy Madden were touring the Museum grounds with a group of local citizens, brainstorming how best to generate public activity around the building. Ideas were flying, and gradually Kent and Madden articulated a vision for a series of focal points on the grounds and inside the lobby.

As the discussion continued, someone asked, “How many separate focal points do you need to make it successful?”

At PPS, we usually don’t talk in terms of numbers, so Kent and Madden gave the question a few minutes thought. They wanted to offer a challenging answer, but not something that would feel completely out of reach. “10,” Kent finally said. “But we can’t just plop down 10 pieces of sculpture and say that’s enough. We also need 10 things to do at each focal point.”



The entrance to the Seattle Art Museum represents an opportunity to create a focal point for public activity...

This experience got everyone at PPS thinking about what precisely makes great places great. It's really comes down to offering a variety of things to do in one spot — making a place more than the sum of its parts. A park is good. A park with a fountain, playground, and popcorn vendor is better. A library across the street is even better, more so if they feature storytelling hours for kids and exhibits on local history. If there's a sidewalk café nearby, a bus stop, a bike trail, and an ice cream parlor, then you have what most people would consider a great place.

What if a neighborhood had 10 places that were that good? The area would then achieve a critical mass — a series of destinations where residents and tourists alike would become immersed in the life of the city for days at a time.



...and if we created ten places in downtown Seattle as good as the revitalized Art Museum, then it would be a great district.

Taking the next step, what if a city could boast 10 such neighborhoods? Then every resident would have access to outstanding public spaces within walking distance of their homes. That's the sort of goal we need to set for all cities if we are serious about enhancing and revitalizing urban life.

We can go even further. How? Apply this idea on a regional scale by linking towns and cities, with major public spaces and mixed-use neighborhoods serving as the connections. That could be the basis for a new paradigm of regional development that sweeps away the destructive pattern of more freeways, big box stores, and cookie-cutter subdivisions.

PPS calls this concept the Power of 10 (we are indebted to the classic short film, "Powers of 10", by Charles and Ray Eames), but there's no reason to get fixated on a particular number. What's essential to keep in mind are the ultimate goals of variety and choice.

If your goal is to build a great city, it's not enough to have a single use dominate a particular place — you need an array of activities for people. It's not enough to have just one great place in a neighborhood — you need a number of them to create a truly lively community. It's not enough to have one great neighborhood in a city — you need to provide people all over town with close-to-home opportunities to take pleasure in public life. And it's not enough to have one livable city or town in a region — you need a collection of interesting communities.



Greenwich Village compensates for a lack of outstanding individual public spaces with its abundance of street-level attractions.

Flexibility is one of the chief values of using the Power of 10 as a framework for thinking about place. Take the neighborhood where the PPS office was formerly located, Greenwich Village in New York City. The area may not contain 10 great public spaces in the usual sense of the term, but it makes up for this deficiency with a vibrant street life and hundreds of small cafes, bars, restaurants, theaters, and small shops enlivening the neighborhood area. Likewise, we've visited towns too small to possess 10 or even three distinct neighborhoods, but which succeed as places nonetheless thanks to lively public gathering spots. You can bend the principles behind the Power of 10, as long as you preserve the spirit.

Everywhere we bring up this idea, citizens become more energized to turn their places around. **The Power of 10 gives people something tangible to strive for** — it helps them visualize what it takes to make their town or city great. It's a way of reminding our clients, our readers and ourselves that by starting efforts at the smallest scale, you can make big changes.