Critical Elements of Great Urban Spaces
Randy H. Shortridge
Introduction

Since its founding in 1946, RTKL has always pursued the creation of a sense of place — a comfortable, humanistic approach to the built environment that puts people at ease and creates character. More than anything, it is this intangible quality that defines the firm’s work, from the groundbreaking efforts of its early years in urban design and new community planning to the commercial engine of the practice’s work in retail during the 1970’s and ‘80’s, to the complex multi-use developments that have springboarded RTKL into a global design presence.

Today, the pursuit of place is even more critical. Issues of sustainability and land stewardship, of smart growth initiatives and fostering a sense of community in an increasingly splintered society make the practice of enlightened urbanism ever more essential.

The Critical Elements of Great Urban Spaces is the work of Randy Shortridge, a 1997 recipient of a Leonard Kagan Design Fellowship. It represents a sizable piece of research and observation that distills the art of placemaking into fundamental precepts grounded with photographic examples. In the interest of shared scholarship, it is presented here in an abridged version to serve as a primer for our friends and clients who share the same interest in this pursuit.
A pedestrian tunnel under 72nd Street at the end of the Mall in Central Park provides a dramatic gateway to the Bethesda Terrace and fountain.
Character

Urban spaces need clearly defined boundaries or limits as well as unique attributes that give them focus: a sense of arrival and enclosure; a scale appropriate to the environment; and such elements as stairways, vantage points and repeating patterns.

Gateway
As actual constructions or symbolic arrival points, gateways are compressed passageways that open into larger spaces beyond. They add to the emotional sense of arrival when entering a city, a district, a building, a plaza or a park.

Enclosure
Groups of buildings, landforms, landscape and water bodies define space and create understandable and psychologically defensible boundaries. Urban plazas and parks need enclosure: entering them should be like discovering a meadow after a long trek through the forest of the city.

Scale
Urban spaces need to be the right size for the activities they accommodate. We search out space that matches our moods. Sometimes we want to be engulfed in a throng, elbow to elbow. Other times we do not want to see another human being. Not every space can satisfy this range in need, but horizontal and vertical limits of public spaces act naturally as sieves for the scale of activities they can sustain.

Vantage Points
From high points, one can overlook and observe the actions of others and define the scope of the greater environment. Simply said, we like to see what we can see.

Stairways
Beyond providing graceful access to places above and below, stairways in the public realm have a secondary, yet possibly more important roll: they provide seating and a vantage point to survey the surrounding environment.

Patterns
Repeated sounds and variations on them turn notes into musical compositions that stir our emotions. The same can be said for repeated elements in the environment. Patterns in paving, in the landscape, in building forms, all create soothing visual frames.
There is no doubt about where you are after entering this gate in Portland.

Portland, Oregon’s Union Station. There is no more grand way to arrive in a city than though the portals of a train station.
Enclosure

Opposite
A sloping grassy flank topped with dense trees creates a gentle sense of enclosure around Long Meadow in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park.

Above
The Channel Gardens at Rockefeller Center in New City are enclosed by flanking buildings of ideal scale and detail. This very comfortable space, full of seating amidst fountains and ever changing flower displays, connects Fifth Avenue to Rockefeller Plaza.
The apparent scale of the Winter Garden in the World Financial Center in Manhattan varies depending on the number of occupants.

A couple enjoys a quiet moment in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park.
Sometimes a little extra boost from Dad is needed to watch the skaters in Rockefeller Square, Manhattan.

Just as its designer Frederick Law Olmstead intended, children survey the view of Central Park’s Great Lawn from Belvedere Castle.
Stairways

Opposite
The 103 Bunker Hill steps designed by Lawrence Halprin connect Hope to Fifth Street and the Central Library in Los Angeles. The south-facing steps, ideal for seating, are reminiscent of Rome’s Spanish Steps with the added feature of a stylized stream channel running down the center.

Below
Stairways are a fragment of the stadium or theater. The athletes and actors are people going about life at the foot of the stair. Sitting on the broad, full story cascade of steps in front of the Metropolitan Museum in New York is a great way to survey the everchanging street scene.
Patterns

Opposite
Trees, benches and lamp posts create strong rhythms along the pedestrian promenade in Battery Park City, Manhattan.

Left
Palm trees form a living colonnade at Waterfront Park in Charleston, South Carolina.
A special management entity maintains Manhattan's Bryant Park with revenues provided by a tax assessment on neighboring properties and by income from concessions in the park. These monies are used, among other things, to keep this immensely popular and well-used park sparkling clean and to plant and care for the beautiful trees, shrubs and flowerbeds.
### Ownership

Every urban space must belong to a neighborhood, district, civic group, or other caretaking entity that is proud of and responsible for that place. Those individuals or entities who assume ownership must allow democratic accessibility, ensure safety and security, and provide for the maintenance of high-quality and cost-effective components within a defined boundary. In most cases, a resident population comprises the soul of ownership.

### Management

The best public spaces have caretakers — individuals, neighborhood groups, a city district, a state, or even a nation that values the place and carefully manages and looks after its best interests.

### Democratic Accessibility

Ideally, everyone should have welcome access and equal opportunity to enjoy public urban space, provided they respect the place and others who also wish to use it. Too many spaces in today’s world purport to be public but exert pressures physical or otherwise to limit use to specific groups.

### Safety and Security

Everyone who visits a public place deserves to feel safe and comfortable while there. The presence of other people using a space is the best type of security. Any active security measures should be benign or invisible.

### Maintenance

Urban places need careful and repeated maintenance to keep them clean and attractive. Details need to be durable to withstand constant use and still perform within a reasonable budget.

### Quality and Durability

Pavement, furnishings, landscapes, and artwork need to withstand constant use; as such, the most durable and high-quality materials should be used without resorting to the mundane. Operating budgets should recognize that over time, even the best materials wear out and require replacement.

### Boundary

Every space needs a recognizable edge and limit of responsibility. The best urban places manage to hide limits of management and ownership responsibility, blurring the boundaries between public and private space.

### Resident Population

People living around and above public space can use and observe it nearly 24 hours a day; and when residents use a place on a regular basis, they assume greater pride and responsibility for its condition.
Management

Opposite
Once an abandoned lot on West 89th Street in Manhattan, the Westside Community Garden has been, since 1976, planted and cared for by residents who recognize it as the social focus of their neighborhood. Despite the threat of development, a 1982 compromise created a permanent garden owned and cared for by neighborhood volunteers.

Above
Neighborhood wards in Savannah, Georgia assume responsibility and care for the public square at the each one of their centers. These squares are the “front yard” for the closely spaced homes, businesses, or public buildings that surround them.
Democratic Accessibility

Amid the dense traffic of downtown Portland Oregon, this wheelchair rider is able to negotiate the city’s streets thanks to curb cuts and appropriate traffic control.
Safety and Security

Opposite
A New York City police officer chats with visitors in Washington Square in Manhattan. The increased visible and mostly benign police presence over the past several years has helped create a renaissance in the use of the city’s public spaces.

Above
While clearly not an ideal solution, most New York City playgrounds have fences like this one in Washington Square. Guardians need not worry about small children wandering off while at play. The fences also protect from the unwanted attention of strangers.
Periodic steam cleaning of the steps in front of the New York Public Library are part of the overall maintenance regimen required to keep this public place clean and attractive.

Window and wall washers above a Portland sidewalk do their part to keep the city clean.
Quality and Durability

Opposite
These steps in New York City’s Central Park are made of solid granite matching that of the hill they scale.

Below
The boardwalk character of the South Cove in Battery Park City, Manhattan is reinforced with durable materials such as heavy timber guardrails, light poles and benches. These materials can withstand both heavy use and intense weather.
A distinct street wall creates a powerful edge all around Central Park in New York City leaving little doubt about where the city ends and the park begins.
Resident Population

Opposite
Dwellings above street level shops in Savannah, Georgia help provide security — eyes on the street — and also create an environment where the street is also valued as the front yard.

Above
Surrounding homes foster a sense of pride-of-ownership, responsibility, and friendly competition to create the most attractive environment possible around nearly all of Savannah’s squares.
Massive sculptures by sculptor Fredrick MacMonnies top the Soldier’s and Sailors Arch in Grand Army Plaza, the monumental entrance to Brooklyn’s Prospect Park.
Authenticity

Every urban setting needs features that make it unique, a place like no other. Historic artifacts, information and educational markers, landmarks and artwork can help imprint distinct characteristics exclusive to that place alone. Authentic places derive character and meaning from local sources: local history, local materials, local climate and local culture. Authentic urban spaces rarely deceive participants about where they are.

History
Memorials and historic markers lend particular significance to a place. They remind the user of a person or event who shaped or influenced the particular character of the place, the city or the nation and tie them to a that location.

Art
Whether steeped in social commentary or simply functioning as an expression of beauty, carefully selected public art lends solemnity, joy, wonder or debate to any space.

Information and Education
Readily available facts (from the history of neighboring buildings to the whereabouts of restrooms or the types of trees overhead and plants underfoot) ensure that public places are easy to use and filled with learning.

Landmarks
Urban spaces need architectural or natural landform elements that distinguish them within the greater urban environment. Landmarks range from simple to complex visually memorable icons that have locally significant meaning, may include inhabitable spaces, or are simply fun or expressive forms.
History

Opposite
This plaza and bronze monument in Tom McCall Park in Portland Oregon reminds the city’s residents about the significant cultural contributions Japanese Americans have played in local history.

Left
Children visit a memorial to the defenders of Fort Sumter on the Battery waterfront in White Point Gardens, Charleston, South Carolina.
Art

Opposite
Prometheus, a sculpture by Paul Manship, hovers over the ice rink in Rockefeller Plaza in New York City.

Left
Sculptor Martin Puryear’s Pylons enliven the waterfront in Battery Park City. The sculptures, symbolic portals between land and water, are dramatically illuminated at night.
Information and Education

Opposite
Signs pointing to locales both near and far attract the attention of passersby in Pioneer Courthouse Square in downtown Portland, Oregon.

Left
A New York subway entry lamppost stands sentry over a Heritage Trail marker on Wall Street.
Landmarks

Opposite
Once the tallest structures in most towns, church steeples like this one in Charleston, South Carolina, are important locational and directional landmarks.

Below
Shown prior to a recent renovation, the historic Public Market Building in Charleston, South Carolina commands a strong presence and acts as a marker in the city’s center.
Dogs and people alike have a place to get water at this fountain along Central Park’s East Drive.
Accommodations

Public urban spaces should help us relax by acknowledging physical comfort and convenience. Successful public spaces provide seating, shelter, restrooms and drinking fountains, accommodate pets, and, where appropriate, encourage vendors to sell food and various sundries.

Seating
All spaces need seating so visitors can rest, converse, and observe the world. Movable chairs or benches are best as they allow groups to arrange seating as needed. Low planter walls should always double as seating surfaces. Some seating can be arranged to promote face-to-face conversation. Lawns are also wonderful places to sit, as people can determine their own posture and have complete flexibility when creating seating groups.

Restrooms and Drinking Fountains
Restrooms and free potable water should always be available in public spaces.

Shelter
When climate reaches extremes, we seek shelter. Public spaces need a place to take refuge from the heat of the sun or a sudden deluge. Sometimes trees suffice, providing shade or protection from a light rain, but arcades, covered walkways, trellises or gazebos can do the job as well.

Vendors
Local entrepreneurs should be allowed to provide convenience goods and basic food and beverages when the need exists, encouraging longer visits and an enlivened streetscape. Public space is enriched by the likes of news and flower stands, or umbrella vendors who magically materialize during a rainstorm.

Dining Areas
Cafe seating and outdoor tables enliven the atmosphere within public spaces and provide opportunities to dine outdoors.

Pets
Because many people have pets as friends and companions, they deserve accommodation along side us when using public space. They need a place to run, socialize, get a drink of water and use the toilet just as we do. Rather than forbidding their presence, public space should encourage pets and provide for their needs.
Seating

Opposite
These granite benches are built into a wall facing the North Cove Yacht Harbor in Battery Park City, Manhattan. People often like to sit with their back to a wall — both because the wall is defensible — that is, no one can approach from behind — and because the wall provides a warm backdrop on a cold winter day.

Left
Besides being well built and located close enough to the adjacent wall to permit those seated to put their feet up, this bench’s greatest asset is its movable backrest. Users can chose which direction to face — toward the lake in the morning or toward the adjacent plaza in the afternoon. This wonderful bench is in Zurich, Switzerland.
Restrooms and Drinking Fountains

Opposite
This beautiful fountain along East Drive at East 90th Street in Central Park is constantly in use for refreshment by people exercising.

Below
A four-basin drinking fountain is one of many on the sidewalks of downtown Portland, Oregon. The continually flowing water is made more appealing on this summer day with the addition of a fresh flower wreath.
Shelter

Opposite
A wrought iron pergola covered with wisteria creates a beautiful shaded seating area in Central Park’s Conservatory Garden.

Above
A pleasantly understated wooden shade structure designed by Calvert Vaux along the south edge of the Rambles offers views of The Lake in Central Park.
**Vendors**

**Opposite**
A young visitor enjoys ice cream from a vendor on Bethesda Terrace in Central Park.

**Left**
A kiosk serves coffee and snacks to visitors at the northwest corner of Bryant Park.
Dining Areas

Opposite
This café in Los Angeles serves local foods to visitors enjoying the spectacle along the Venice boardwalk.

Left
These restaurants in Seattle's Pioneer Square provide outdoor dining areas that engage patrons with the street life around them.
A puppy is introduced to the result of Stephen Skidmore’s 1888 will request that a fountain be built in downtown Portland, Oregon providing refreshment for “horses, men and dogs.” The Skidmore Fountain is now the heart of Old Town.

Savannah’s squares are ideal for dog walking.
Yellow ochre leaves are illuminated against a water backdrop.
Nature

Especially when enveloped by the urban context, nature has profound psychological and therapeutic benefits; it should play some role in every urban place. Colorful planting, the sight and sound of water, leaves moving in the breeze, the textures of stones and plants, the smell of earth and flowers or the air after a summer rain, and the sound and sight of birds and squirrels and other urban wildlife all make us feel better. When combined with the presence of the sun and sky, the change of seasons and the movement of time itself, we tend to forget the pressures of life and relax. Nature restores us.

Green Canopy
Trees are the simplest human shelter. The oxygen they create, the shade cast like a roof, the dappled sunlight through soft green leaves on branches in Spring, or the rustling of dried yellowing leaves in Fall, are all sources of protective solace.

Water’s Edge
Civilization has always settled next to water. We are drawn to it, walk alongside it, hear waves lap against the shore, watch it change with wind and light throughout the day, and marvel in its nighttime mystery.

Texture
Variations in the texture of the environment help create visual and tactile complexity. Cobblestone paving, smooth granite or ivy-covered walls are a few examples.

Colorful Planting
Foliage in vibrant colors and striking textures adds dimension and interest to public spaces. The evolving beauty of living plants — their color, motion and fragrance — is forever compelling.

Sight and Sound of Water
The rhythmic sound and visual movement of clean, clear water soothes and serves to mask unpleasant sounds in the environment.

Interactive Water
Water sustains life: We are born of it; we are primarily made of it; and we must drink it every day to live. Touching water, dipping our hands into it, submerging ourselves in its cool gentle embrace, is quite simply fun, especially on a hot summer day.

Time
The change in the quality of light, temperature and humidity throughout the day or over time adds variety and evolving interest to parks and plazas and streets. Seasons regulate the character of landscape; colors, fragrances and textures change.

Sun and Shade
Sunny places and shady oases need to be present in every outdoor place. As warm-blooded animals, we crave the warming sun on a winter day and retreat to the shade of a tree on a summer afternoon. Climate extremes enhance these desires and should be carefully evaluated. Some spaces need nearly full sun, others need nearly complete shade.
Green Canopy

Opposite
A shaded pedestrian walkway and reflecting pool in Portland Center.

Left
The tree canopy along the Central Park Side of New York’s Fifth Avenue creates shade and interesting textures.
Water's Edge

Opposite
Pedestrians overlook the Hudson River from a pedestrian promenade in New York City's Riverside Park.

Left
Once a bustling port, then a run-down busy street, Portland has transformed its Willamette River waterfront into a peaceful park and a distinctive edge for the downtown area.
Sheep Meadow in Central Park enfolds visitors in a soft green blanket.
Texture

Opposite
Relatively smooth slate paving is used for walking areas and rough granite cobbles are for seating areas on this pedestrian street in Manhattan’s Battery Park City.

Left
Rough cobbles, recycled from ship ballast, vibrate riders during a race through the streets of Savannah, Georgia.
Colorful Planting

Opposite
Westlake Center in Seattle is enlivened on a spring day with planters full of flowers.

Left
Chrysanthemums the color of taxis brighten the traffic median in Fall on New York’s Park Avenue.
Sight and Sound of Water

Opposite
The fountain in Forsyth Park in Savannah.

Left
The wall-sized fountain in Paley Park in Manhattan masks the sounds of the city. One quickly forgets the rush of the metropolis beyond.
Interactive Water

Opposite
A young boy cannot resist the fountain in Waterfront Park in Charleston.

Time
Above
Public spaces exhibit a new complexion during each season of the year.
Visitors come to Bryant Park from the shaded canyons of New York streets to find the warm sun on a cold fall day.

Shaded seating is a valuable commodity on a warm day in Seattle.
A jogger heads across a meadow next to the Willamette River in Governor Tom McCall Waterfront Park, Portland, Oregon.
Social and Private Space

Public space is the theater of everyday life. There is joy and comfort in watching and interacting with neighbors and strangers. Providing places to sit and talk, run and play and listen to music, to watch jugglers and buy vegetables and teach children to appreciate these activities is both a right and a responsibility. At the center of the public environment, in the least likely of places really, also exists the chance to be and spend time alone.

Dialogue
The best urban places are those that provide a comfortable place to meet and talk with one another.

Play
Public spaces should be flexible enough to allow for a broad variety of organized or spontaneous play.

Entertainment
Presentations of all kinds, from music to theater and oration, should be allowed and encouraged. Public performance watching is educational, restorative and pleasurable.

Stress Relief
Urban life provides a constant barrage of sensory stimulation: The sights, sounds and smells of the city and its inhabitants in close quarters can be overwhelming. Public spaces should provide a setting for retreat and recovery.

Children’s Play Areas
Even the smallest children are capable of finding magic almost anywhere; bugs crawling on leaves, rocks to climb, or a puddle to splash. As they get older, they need and deserve more complex activities. Safe and secure playgrounds with imaginative features help them develop their physical and social capabilities.

Events
Special and regular events, markets and fairs, celebrations and political rallies all help define community. Public places should be equipped to handle groups of people that can fill them to capacity.

Quiet
The most successful public spaces allow truly private moments amid the whirlwind of public activity. Quiet, secluded escapes are necessary, even as small corners of a much larger and more public realm.
Dialogue

Opposite
The Winter Garden at the World Financial Center in Battery Park City provides a relaxed environment for an informal discussion.

Above
The Ira Keller fountain in Portland has a hundred places ideal for sitting down for a conversation. The huge waterfalls drown out sounds from the city all around.
An artist finds a subject worth interpreting in Central Park.

A great way to play in Central Park is by renting a rowboat on the Lake.
Crowds gather regularly to watch a variety of entertainment in Pioneer Square. Here, a local band performs early rock-and-roll classics for a lunchtime audience.

An opportunity for a family portrait on the Venice boardwalk.
Stress Relief

Opposite
A man gives an impromptu massage to a friend next to the Los Angeles Central Library.

Left
This woman is relaxed and completely comfortable in Waterfront Park in Charleston, South Carolina.
Children’s Play Areas

Opposite
One of the most popular places for small children in Central Park is the Alice in Wonderland statue. Kid’s love to clamber on its broad, welcoming bronze figures.

Below
Children play in one of the playgrounds in Washington Square in Manhattan.
Events

Opposite
Fresh fruits tempt the palette at the Fort Worth, Texas farmer’s market.

Left
A weekend market vendor in Union Square in New York City offers a variety of seasonal color.
Quiet

Opposite
Riverside Park on the upper west side in Manhattan is a wonderful place to find solitude from the rush of the city.

Above
This young woman, reading in Washington Square, has found one of many places in the public realm to find peace and quiet alone.