

# Unlocking the Power of Public Spaces

Molly Lester for PennPraxis 20 September 2017

*Design has a long history as a platform for social innovation the United States. At the University of Pennsylvania, which remains rooted in Benjamin Franklin's 1749 blueprint for training leaders in business, government, and public service, designers have been agents for change since the late 19th century. Today, the hub for applied research, outreach, and practice at the University's School of Design (PennDesign) is PennPraxis, a 501(c)(3) which bridges the school's five academic units -- architecture, landscape architecture, city planning, historic preservation, and fine arts -- to partner with public, private, and non-profit organizations. In a new series for the Social Innovations Journal, Molly Lester surveys notable PennPraxis initiatives -- here, in the realm of public space.*

Urbanists around the country have shown considerable enthusiasm in recent years for creative placemaking and other tactical interventions to transform the public realm. While many of these interventions are deemed successful, their actual impact is largely unknown. As a research-based center working in this arena, PennPraxis places a strong emphasis on data collection and outcome evaluation with many of its public space projects, resulting

in the dissemination of research findings to inform future interventions in the built environment. Several current and recent projects have examined and/or developed new forms of programming and engagement in the public realm, supporting new, data-informed approaches to reimagining, redesigning, and reactivating public space.

Each year, PennPraxis invites proposals from PennDesign students for collaborative, interdisciplinary "Social Impact Projects" that engage with local community partners. To date, three rounds of projects have been awarded, including many that test new design interventions in public spaces. In the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia, the 2015 Pop Ups for a Purpose project took a cost-effective, interactive approach to improving the underpass beneath the elevated Lehigh Viaduct along Frankford Avenue, also an unsafe, divisive neighborhood boundary. Three PennDesign students from landscape architecture and fine arts collaborated with New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC), realizing a one-day redesign of the underpass, demonstrating how small interventions can go a long way to help realize a community's vision for its public space.

The following year, a student team also supported by a social impact grant developed Reclaiming Sharswood, which built on a prior historic preservation studio based in the Sharswood neighborhood of Philadelphia, which at the time was the subject of a massive and fraught public housing redevelopment plan. Six students from Diverse

Design, another student-led organization at PennDesign, partnered with Sharswood community members with help from Habitat for Humanity and Lowes Home Improvement to design and construct a new location for a displaced park and community garden -- a significant community resource in the neighborhood. Students learned directly from neighborhood activists how to envision and program this critical public resource and symbol of community empowerment in the face of sweeping eminent domain challenges.

Aside from their educational value for PennDesign students and faculty, the Social Impact Project Awards also directly benefit residents, from their cost-effective interventions in their neighborhood, and community organizations, to the capacity-building and convening role brought about through students' creativity, fresh perspectives, and motivation.

Beyond working with students and faculty, PennPraxis also works with organizations throughout Philadelphia as a convener and facilitator of community conversations, capacity building, and data collection. Working with numerous partners through the local Reimagining the Civic Commons initiative, the PennPraxis team collected on-the-ground data to establish baseline monitoring to evaluate future programming of public space and civic assets. The lead organization -- the Fairmount Park Conservancy (FPC) -- engaged PennPraxis to document the impacts of the redesign of five sites in Philadelphia,

including several parks and one library. Rather than treating these five resources as separate ventures, the initiative brings partners from each site together so that their distinct assets can be made stronger when envisioned as a network of shared programming and experiences. In order to test this hypothesis of systemic impact, PennPraxis designed and implemented a methodology for site observation, intercept surveys, and user counts that would inform current use. The data collected will be used to evaluate the success of site investments and programming that serve the active and potential users of each place and their shared system.

Through this larger initiative, PennPraxis also collected data on a micro-scale, surveying users that participated in and organized small, singular events called Innovation Fund projects. These projects are early-action engagements, ranging from pop-up events to temporary installations, and they allow community partners to test ideas and learn from each other in more inclusive conversations. PennPraxis served as convener, and also continually tested and evaluated projects as they were executed, to inform longer, more sustained investments and authentic, community-engaged approaches for designing public space.

Organized in September 2016, the Viola Alley Connector event transformed a narrow alley in the East Parkside neighborhood in West Philadelphia into a lively gathering space for learning and meeting neighbors. The event

celebrated the history of the neighborhood and invited Civic Commons partners to join in the festivities. The event was hosted by the Centennial Parkside CDC and included other partners who each contributed programming: Bartram's Garden (located in Southwest Philadelphia) brought a farm stand to the alley; Reading Terminal Market (based in Center City on the edge of Chinatown) gauged interest for a local, subsidized CSA; and the Free Library of Philadelphia's Culinary Literacy Center led cooking demonstrations. PennPraxis served as a facilitator, offering capacity-building support to link community groups, share knowledge, and learn from past failures and successes.

In addition to projects that have largely tested new ideas in parks and vacant lots, another PennPraxis project focused on arguably the most public spaces of all: city streets. Organized in the fall of 2016 as the first car-free street event in Philadelphia, Philly Free Streets tested the idea that public streets could favor pedestrians, cyclists, and spectators, rather than the vehicles that often dominate. To measure the response to Philly Free Streets, the local advocacy group Open Streets PHL worked with PennPraxis (with support from the Knight Foundation) to evaluate the reactions of participants and local businesses. Working with a faculty advisor, the PennPraxis team of staff and students designed a methodology for data collection and deployed two survey instruments on the day of the event, which drew around

30,000 people. Their intercept interviews and surveys measuring gauged the economic impact and attitudes toward the event found local businesses and participants overwhelmingly positive. The data also revealed that despite significant outreach efforts, the event was not reaching new audiences: participants tended to be wealthier, more white, and more physically active than city averages. With this data in hand, the city selected a different route for the next open streets event, to be held on October 28, 2017. The 2017 route connects more neighborhoods, in keeping with a PennPraxis recommendation that subsequent open-streets events take place in communities that would capture greater diversity and potentially reinforce community revitalization efforts outside the city core.

PennPraxis has seen that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for public space or community-based design. Such interventions require experimentation and exploration. Students and practitioners must adapt to different community partners and circumstances. Meanwhile, conversations around urbanism continue to expand and mature. As a result, PennPraxis continues to test new models that offer designers of all skill levels the opportunity to create authentic public spaces at different scales of intervention.