

Creating an Inclusive Public Space

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ABSTRACT

Public spaces, done well, can become the most cherished parts of a neighborhood or urban area. In the absence of public parks or plazas, quasi-public spaces such as cafés, beer gardens, and restaurants can function in the same way that a public space would, at least for those who can afford to patronize these establishments. Using the theoretical lenses of public plaza design from William Whyte, Reagan Koch, and Alan Latham, this paper uses a case study of a block of Downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan to argue that commercial streets, too, can help people feel at home in the urban environment. While this block welcomes potential patrons, no current space welcomes people who cannot afford to be patrons. Despite challenges in navigating this public/private space, welcoming a wider demographic into the space could provide both social and economic benefits.

A pleasant public streetscape improves the walkability of a neighborhood, encourages physical activity, and creates a stage for building social capital. Yet oftentimes, symbols and messaging in the space explicitly state who is welcome and who is not. Given the benefits of public space, I consider the elements of the 100 block of West Liberty Street in Downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan and how users engage with the space. A successful public space provides shared benefits and demonstrates inclusivity, as represented through Reagan Koch and Alan Latham's theory of domestication, in which users feel at home in public.¹ Focusing on methods that the block's businesses employ to attract potential customers, this study finds evidence of William Whyte's suggestions for a variety of seating options and common points of attraction.² However, while retail establishments on the 100 block of West Liberty Street engage pedestrians' senses to attract them into their shops as customers, the block avoids an opportunity to invite all users of the space to linger. Simple design strategies could create a more welcoming streetscape for a broader demographic of users, allowing more

people to share in the benefits of this public good.

The 100 block of West Liberty Street sits towards the western edge of Downtown Ann Arbor. Specifically, the observations focus on the southern side of the block, which faces the street with storefronts and backs against a parking lot. The corners bustle with activity, particularly on warm days. At the west end of the block, outdoor patio seating at The Beer Grotto on West Liberty and Ashley Streets fills during evening and weekend hours with customers lounging on colorful chairs at mosaic-topped café tables. At the eastern end of the street, Starbucks creates traffic at all hours of the day, with patrons grabbing coffee to-go or lingering to chat, read, or work. These corners draw activity at various points of the day, yet the block itself serves as a thoroughfare for downtown pedestrians and patrons of the South Ashley Street parking lot. Other players on this street include residential apartments and a mix of retail tenants: Vin Bar, West Side Book Shop, Salon Vox, healthcare offices, and the Ann Arbor Art Center.

SENSORY STRATEGIES ATTRACT CUSTOMERS

Businesses on this block employ design strategies that attract passersby – when such design strategies align with their economic interest. William Whyte offers two theories, triangulation and self-congestion, that describe how people interact with design and spaces. William Whyte’s theory of triangulation explains the connection between strangers over a common attraction, such as interesting sculptures or street performances.³ Whyte’s theory of self-congestion explains that “what attracts people most . . . is other people.”⁴ Simply, people go where other people are present. Business owners try to leverage these complementary phenomena by carefully arranging a variety of seating options and

displays to beckon pedestrians to their storefronts and into their stores.

On a typical afternoon, one can witness triangulation at the 100 block of West Liberty Street. One particular mid-week November afternoon, two pedestrians photograph hanging ornaments in the window of the Ann Arbor Art Center (Figure 1). Other passersby respond, slowing their gaits and pointing their gazes in the same direction. Strangers exchange simple expressions of appreciation, extending their focus to the strategically placed holiday display, towering with festive blown-glass spheres and colorful cupcake ornaments. Next door, Salon Vox extends its atmosphere beyond its walls and onto the street with music that welcomes passersby into its space. In warmer seasons, Salon Vox



Figure 1: Pedestrians photograph hanging ornaments in the Ann Arbor Art Center window.



Figure 2: Pedestrians pause to browse the West Side Book Shop's outdoor bookshelf.

props open its double doors, reducing the barrier between the sidewalk and the store. West Side Book Shop, a rare and used book store, continues the trend with a display of literature on an outdoor bookshelf, situated at a natural height for pedestrians to browse (Figure 2). These three businesses create a collective atmosphere to encourage pedestrians to wander into their shops.

In addition to extending the sensory experience of the shops onto the street, businesses make space for customers in the public realm by providing a variety of seating options. Doing so facilitates self-congestion, whereby patrons attract additional patrons. Vin Bar and Beer Grotto situate street furniture on the sidewalk, providing additional tables for customers. Vin Bar's outdoor seating expands its customer base to a wider set of lifestyles. The wine bar's narrow footprint would otherwise restrict a group with a dog and a baby stroller from choosing Vin Bar to unwind on a Friday evening. Instead, the group socializes on Vin Bar's street furniture. Vin Bar even allows them to consume their own snacks, which likely allows this group with children to linger longer. This accommodation not only expands the establishment's clientele but also adapts to its context. This flexibility and adaptation allows more of the population to feel at home on this block, at least the population who can afford the price of offered goods and services.⁵

UNRECOGNIZED OPPORTUNITIES FOR LINGERING

Despite this observation of accommodation, retail establishments seem to engage the public only when users serve their economic interests. The domestication of the space does not extend to the public as a whole.

This stretch along the 100 block of West Liberty Street distinctly lacks available seating for non-customers. Beer Grotto includes an array of comfortable seating options, but a black wrought-iron fence and stone wall separate the street from the patio (Figure 3). While regulation for liquor licenses requires this separation for the consumption of alcohol, the foreboding black bars with thin, sharp ornamentation warn away individuals who may be seeking a seat without buying a drink. This fence reflects a technique that urban sociologist Mike Davis calls a "fortress effect," which incorporates certain architectural styles "not as an inadvertent failure of design, but as deliberate socio-spatial strategy."⁶ Whether truly deliberate or not, the fence design signals a warning against sitting or leaning against the structure. The exclusive provision of privatized seating prevents low-income and homeless populations from "becom[ing] legitimized as valid users of the space."⁷ Instead of inviting pedestrians who may not necessarily be patrons to linger in this streetscape, seating options serve only paying customers. One can also observe this trend at the Ann Arbor Art Center. Outside its entrance, the organization has two beautifully tiled



Figure 3: The Beer Grotto's wrought-iron fence defines public street space and private commercial space.

benches dedicated to major donors, but the benches face the South Ashley Parking Lot rather than the West Liberty Street entrance (Figure 4). The bench location at this auto-centric back entrance serves students or visitors traveling by car, providing no respite to passing pedestrians.

Aside from these furniture options, the site does not integrate seating options in the architectural features along the street. Though benches and chairs are standard seats, “the best course is to maximize the sittability of inherent features.”⁸ As Whyte indicates, people will sit on ledges, planters, or steps, so long as the height and size of the flat space allows sitting comfortably. In addition to a lack of non-privatized public seating, this block omits suitable “integral sitting” space.⁹ Planters on the street stand too high for sitting or even leaning against as a table (Figure 5). Their ledges are too narrow. A mixed-use office and apartment building, 101 West Liberty, has a space next to its door that could accommodate a bench or two. Instead, property management owf the residential building has filled the bench-sized nook with three concrete planters (Figure 6). These planters’ ledges also do not extend far enough to accommodate sitting. This building’s entrance avoids the creation of sitting space and signals exclusion with a controlled entry callbox.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the business owner’s perspective, design strategies to avoid loiterers may be intended to protect employees and customers from potential harm or discomfort. Private businesses do need to safeguard their property and potential to increase revenues. Furthermore, private businesses must operate within the



Figure 4: The Ann Arbor Art Center’s benches at its back entrance, facing the parking lot.



Figure 5: Planters along the frontage of Starbucks stand too high for sitting and have narrow ledges.

framework that permits and codes allow. However, on the 100 block of West Liberty Street, the boundary between public and private space blurs. Businesses privatize the public realm by creating sidewalk cafés and messages of who belongs (or not) on the street. Even if people can experience a dedicated seating area as a customer, they lose space as a non-patron pedestrian. A tradeoff occurs for the public. Instead, private actors should give back to the public realm, and planners should encourage these opportunities. Koch and Latham argue that successful spaces provide all users with the dignity of belonging in a public space. Beyond improving the social good, such a successful space would yield a stronger supportive network of stakeholders that could increase revenues for businesses as well.

In order to encourage street life, the streetscape must encourage a sense of belonging for all users, not simply potential customers. Koch and Latham indicate that “when public spaces work well, these relationships are inclusive, convivial and democratic.”¹⁰ In order for such shared domestication to occur, spaces require a foundation of the “ethos” or goals of the space, furnishings that allow for activities, invitations for users “to make themselves at home,” and accommodation to the context of the site and the ways people actually use the space.¹¹ As mentioned above, this site should continue to extend invitations to pedestrians through sensory engagement. However, retail managers should combine these efforts with invitations to those who may not be frequenting their shop. Simple acts of putting out water bowls for dogs include additional users. Expansion of ledge widths or signage that encourages sitting would create “collective legibility” for a larger population.¹² Planners could also

engage in these simple acts, adding street planters that could serve as extra seating.

While businesses have the right to promote their own sales and attract potential customers, additional space on the street should embrace the greater public, particularly those people whom businesses may seek to avoid. In San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Grand Rapids, cities work with private businesses and non-profit organizations to take back the public realm with one possible strategy, “parklets,” which are seasonal on-street platforms that transform curbside parking into public space. These spaces are distinctly public spaces, available to any pedestrian, biker,



Figure 6: Planters occupy the ledge next to the 101 W. Liberty entrance. The edge of the brick where the street slopes downward offers opportunity for sitting, despite the planters.



Figure 7: Public users of space cluster on the corner of Main and W. Liberty Streets, creating an informal public space.

or passerby, though private businesses may maintain or sponsor the space. Chairs, tables, and plants foster pockets of vibrancy on the street. A study by the University City District (UCD) in Philadelphia finds that parklets welcome families with strollers, providing space to lounge, eat, or socialize around businesses that they would otherwise have too much difficulty navigating. The study also demonstrates that business owners adjacent to parklets see up to a 20% increase in sales after parklet installation.¹³ This study suggests that attracting people, even non-patrons, through self-congestion, can benefit business sales through the improvement of vibrancy on the block.

On the 100 block of West Liberty Street, businesses effectively privatize sidewalks for café seating, eliminating this space from the public realm. In exchange for private café seating, planners and cities should partner with businesses to support a public parklet on the block. In fact, the City of Ann Arbor already includes recommendations for parklets in a “Best Practice Findings” draft document accompanying the adopted “Downtown Street Design Manual.”¹⁴

Even without the implementation of parklet strategies in Downtown Ann Arbor, one can find inspiration in the ways that users already improvise on this very block. Despite the complete lack of seating options, street users sit on steps and stoops after businesses have closed. At Beer Grotto, despite the fence that warns away people seeking a seat, pedestrians have worn smooth its stone wall corner as they sit and wait for crosswalk lights to turn green. People have strayed from intended design and adapted to the elements of the street available to them. At the end of this block, at Main and West Liberty Streets, the very

users that the private businesses choose to exclude cluster on the corner (Figure 7). Panhandlers sit and chat, and a vendor sells *Groundcover News*, a newspaper that people experiencing homelessness write and sell. A street performer brings his own seating – an upside-down crate. Rather than deterring customers, this activity occurs outside of Starbucks, which sees the greatest amount of traffic on this Thursday afternoon. As an example of self-congestion, travelers with suitcases stand in this location while they determine their next route. The 100 block of West Liberty should extend this example of activity to the remaining stretch of the block, welcoming a broader range of people to inhabit the space through invitational symbolism and sitting space. ■

Endnotes

1. Regan Koch and Alan Latham, "On the Hard Work of Domesticating a Public Space," *Urban Studies Journal* 50, no. 1 (2013): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098012447001>.
2. William H. Whyte, "Introduction, The Life of Plazas, Sitting Space, and Sun, Wind, Trees, and Water," in *The Urban Design Reader*, ed. Michael Larice and Elizabeth MacDonald (New York: Routledge, 2013), 198-213.
3. William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, New York: Project for Public Spaces, 1980. Video.
4. Whyte, "Introduction, The Life of Plazas, Sitting Space, and Sun, Wind, Trees, and Water," 203.
5. Koch and Latham, "On the Hard Work of Domesticating a Public Space," 17.
6. Mike Davis, "Fortress L.A.," in *The City Reader*, ed. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (New York: Routledge, 2011), 199.
7. Ibid.
8. Whyte, "Introduction, The Life of Plazas, Sitting Space, and Sun, Wind, Trees, and Water," 205.
9. Ibid.
10. Koch and Latham, "On the Hard Work of Domesticating a Public Space," 14.
11. Ibid., 17.
12. Ibid.
13. University City District, "The Case for Parklets: Measuring the Impact on Sidewalk Vitality and Neighborhood Businesses," 2015, https://issuu.com/universitycity/docs/the_case_for_parklets_2015?e=4547788/11667837.
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