

A TRANSIT ALLIANCE BEST PRACTICES STUDY: KEY FINDINGS

YOUR PLACE MUST BE UNIQUE TO YOUR COMMUNITY

When we asked respondents to rank the most important physical attributes, many expressed struggling with which were “most” important.

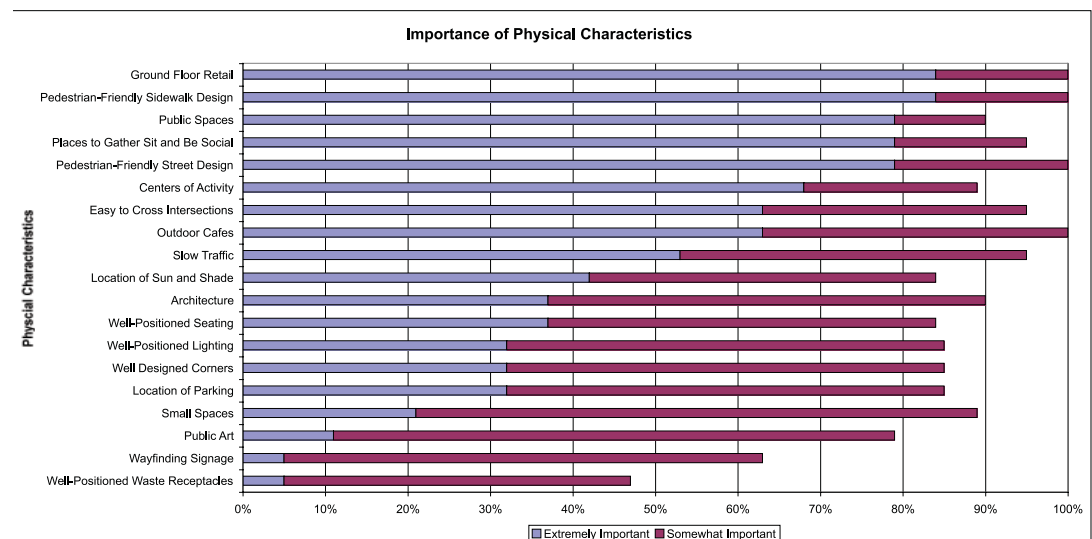
Which physical characteristics are most important largely depends on the place, we discovered in our interviews. It varies from place to place, we found.

A cookie cutter approach is growing in popularity according to the experts we interviewed.

Communities should beware.

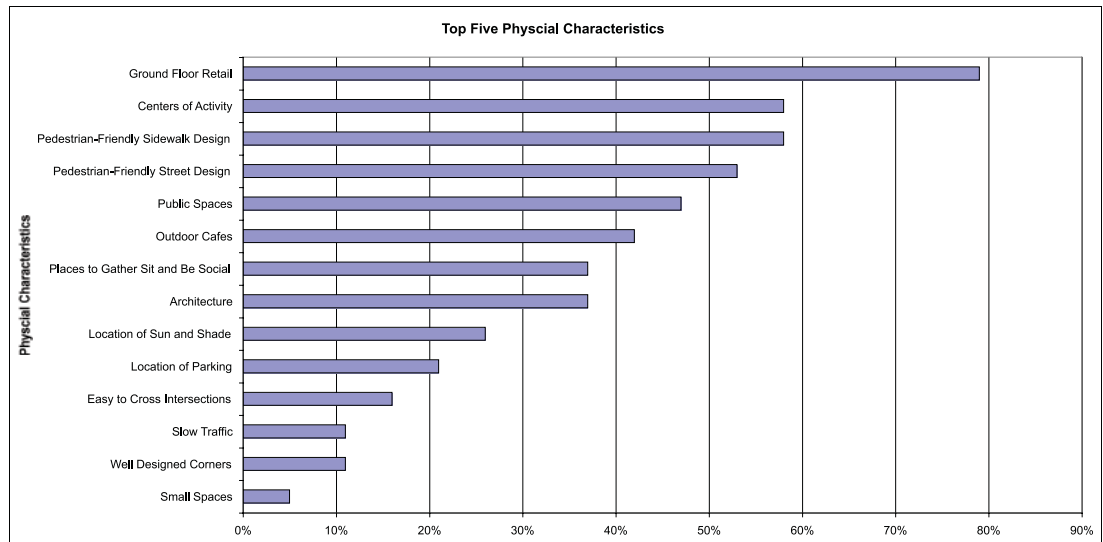
The experts tell us that without a truly unique and memorable sense of place, the cookie crumbles.

Albeit reluctant, respondents did rate physical attributes in terms of importance. In response to the question, “In your opinion, how important are these characteristics to making a place people oriented?” Respondents provided the following ratings.



A few respondents added other attributes they felt were extremely important or somewhat important including: residential units, urban landscaping, water features, parallel parking, clean streets and sidewalks, colorful and discreet signs for shops, texture and layering, successful retail, good sight lines and absence of graffiti.

Respondents were asked to rank the top five physical characteristics and ground floor retail, pedestrian friendly sidewalk and street design, centers of activity and public spaces were ranked in the top five most often. The following graph shows the percentage of times respondents placed each attribute in the top five.



While these physical characteristics were rated highest, it is very important to understand that no single formula works. We heard over and over in the interviews that there is not one physical design formula that fits every situation.”

- “Start with the place. Each is different.”
- “You have to deal with the hand you are dealt.”
- “The physical environment of the successful places I’ve been wasn’t all the same.”

THE LIFE OF A COMMUNITY IS AKIN TO THAT OF A CHILD

Nearly every person we interviewed, at some point compared creating and sustaining a sense of place with organic growth. “You have to bring the place to life,” was perhaps the most common metaphor. Others include:

- “When you look at it from a grand enough scale you can see that it operates like an organism.”
- “It is important to have healthy streets.”
- “Sense of place goes beyond the words. It’s the soul of the place. The community’s soul is what people are looking for.”

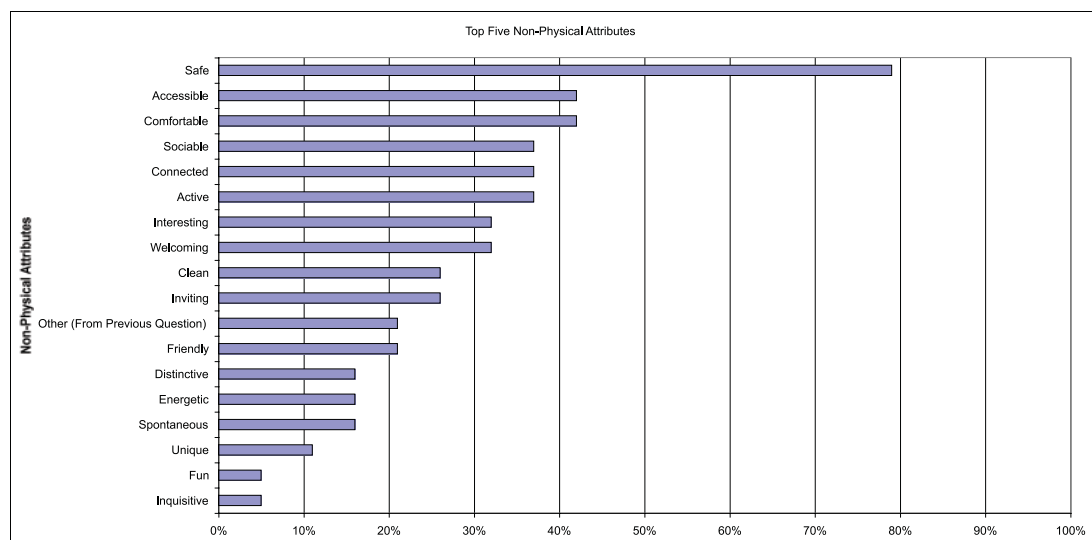
Words that are often associated with people we like to be around are used to describe places. Project For Public Spaces, in its book, *“How to Turn a Place Around,”* states that “when people describe a place they enjoy, words like ‘safe,’ ‘fun,’ ‘charming,’ and ‘welcoming’ tend to come up repeatedly.”

Some even compared creating and sustaining a people-oriented place to raising a child.

- “Think about a space like a small child. As it grows it has to be nurtured and it’s got to be disciplined at times and it has to be encouraged at others. You don’t treat the child the same way at age two as age 12. You don’t communicate with it the same way, you don’t punish it the same way and you don’t reward it the same way. You give it more independence and autonomy as it grows up.”
- “When you have a child, you adjust the physical environment to make them safe and feel safe.”

PEOPLE-ORIENTED PLACES FEEL SAFE AND SECURE

When we asked respondents to rank the most important non-physical attributes, one non-physical attribute stood out -- “Safe.” Safe was ranked in the top five by 79 percent of interviewees, twice as many as any other attribute.



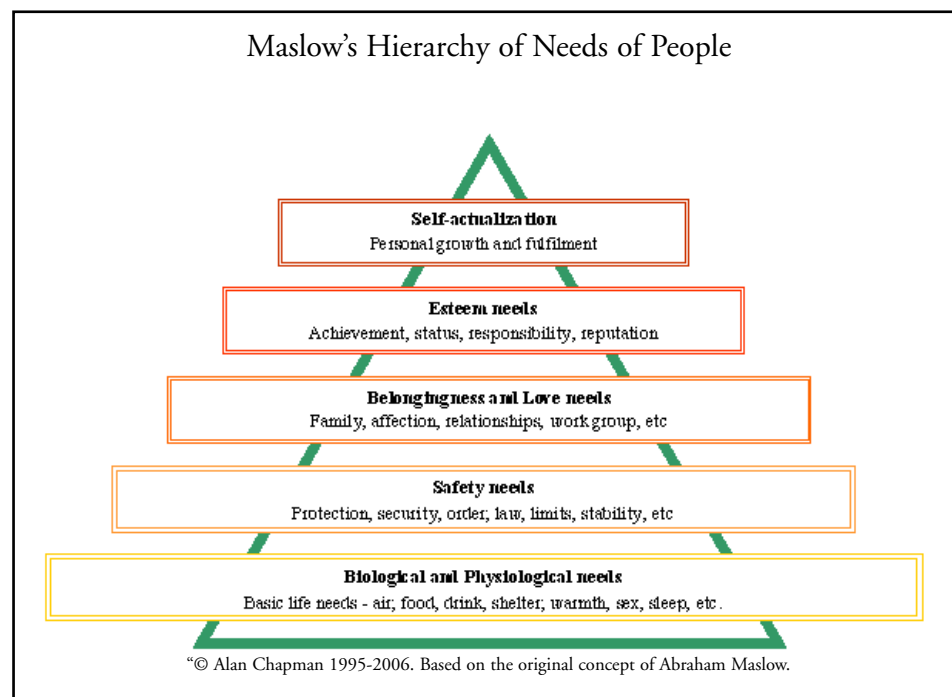
In interviews, respondents validated safety as the most important non-physical attribute. There comments included:

- “The most important issue for anything to become a place is always safety and security. Nothing else comes close.”
- “Obviously the first fundamental thing is safety. Do you feel safe? Safe is more than am I in danger of crime. Safe is familiarity and comfort.”
- “What makes people comfortable is safety.”
- “There has to be the perception of safety.”
- “I think safety is huge.”

One respondent went on to say that "safe" is a relative term. He used the example of how some "people might venture into an unsafe people place, places like Greenwich Village. There was a time when you wouldn't take your wife and kids down there. But, if you were out with the guys you might wander into Greenwich Village. The fact that it is not as safe as another place isn't a consideration. Safe is relative."

MASLOW POINTS THE WAY TO GO

As we learned of the basic physical needs of a place and learned how important safety is, it reminded us of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

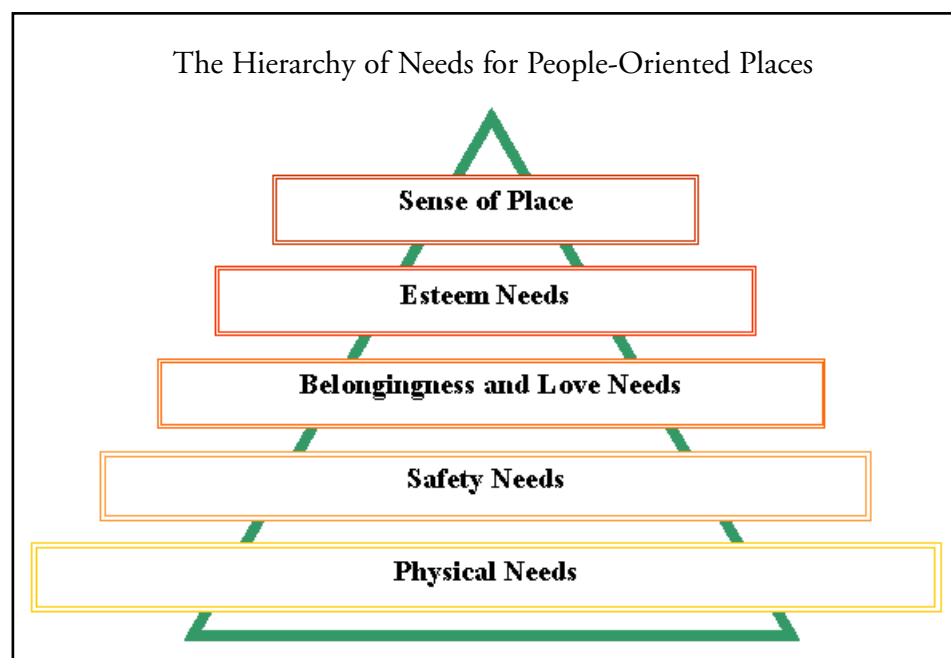


First presented in "*A Theory of Human Motivation*," in 1943, Maslow hypothesized that once a person's basic survival needs were met, other "higher order" needs that lead to "self-actualization" come into play. Maslow separated these needs as "D-needs" (deficiency) and "B-needs" (being).

"The underlying thesis is that those who have satisfied their D-needs and are motivated by B-needs are actualizing the deeper potentials of being human." He believed that the D-needs – or deficiency -- take precedence over B-needs – or sense of being. And, before a person can take care of their B-needs, their D-needs have to be to a large extent, satisfied. The order of needs that Maslow identified for people are:

- **Biological and Physiological Needs** – the basic needs of life – air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, sleep, etc.
- **Safety Needs** – The need to feel protection, security, order, law, limits, and stability.
- **Belongingness and Love Needs** – The need to be accepted by family and friends. The need for affection and relationships.
- **Esteem Needs** – The need to feel valued, achievement, status, responsibility. To have a good reputation.
- **Self-Actualization** – Personal growth and fulfillment. This stage is described as the continuous desire to fulfill potentials, to "be all you can be." People who achieve this level continue to become the most complete, the fullest people they can be.

To achieve this stage, you must have your lower needs satisfied, at least mostly. If a person's lower needs are unmet, they can't fully devote themselves to fulfilling their potential.



PLACES ARE BORN AND MATURE; OTHERWISE, THEY DIE

We found through the study that there are striking similarities between a person attaining self actualization and a place self actualizing or attaining a true sense of place.

The order of needs of a place appears to be:

- **Physical Needs** – The basic needs of a place are the physical characteristics that provide the foundation from which a place can become people-oriented.
- **Safety Needs** – The importance of safety was clearly validated by respondents as the most important non-physical characteristic. It seems simple enough, if people do not feel safe in a space, they will not stay there and they will not likely return.
- **Belongingness and Love Needs** – A place we chose to be in will make us feel a sense of belongingness. In the survey, the attributes of accessible, social and connected rounded out the top five non-physical characteristics. Why? Because people are attracted to people and it is through being around other people that we satisfy this need.
- **Esteem Needs** – A place needs to achieve a level above simply being safe and loved – a level of derived value. Respondents explained this by saying, “If I derive value from being there, I’m more likely to return” and “Places need to stimulate the senses. When you remember a place, you remember what you saw, smelled, heard, touched or tasted.”
- **Sense of Place** – It became evident in the process of conducting the research that a place becomes a people-oriented place only if it is never considered finished. If you consider a place being finished, then you are saying it can’t self-actualize anymore. And few of us will admit that we are done as a person. There is always room for growth in every individual and every place.

The basic needs of a place are the physical characteristics of a place that provide the foundation from which it can become a people-oriented place. Respondents validated this in both the survey and in the interviews. In the interviews, they explained their survey rankings by stating:

- “The physical characteristics set the playing field. It has to have the right size, scale and frame. If those things don’t work, nothing else will.”
- “The physical characteristics can either help or hinder the development of non-physical attributes.”
- “A well designed place will create the opportunity for all of the non-physical attributes to follow suite.
- “The physical characteristics of the place support the non-physical attributes and features.”

The physical characteristics do appear to be the “basic needs” of place making.

Safety was clearly validated by respondents as the most important non-physical characteristic. Eighty percent of respondents placed safety in the top five – twice as many as did any other non-physical attribute. It seems simple enough, if people do not feel safe in a space, they will not stay there and they will not likely return.

But, delivering in this area can be tall order and must be fully calculated into the equation of sustaining people-oriented places.

PEOPLE WANT TO BELONG AND BE LOVED

A place we choose to be in would make us feel a sense of belongingness and love. This is validated in the interviews as well as in the literature. People are attracted to people. Why? Because it is through other people that we satisfy these needs.

In many of the interviews, respondents stated these attributes came after the need to be “safe.”

- “A welcoming environment implies that it is already safe and secure.”
- “If a place is not safe, it is not welcoming. People will not return.”
- “If I go to an interesting and inquisitive place, a place where I might even feel welcomed, that might not make me feel safe. I’m probably not going to go there very often.”

WE WANT TO EXCHANGE GOODS, SERVICES AND IDEAS; AND STIMULATE OUR FIVE SENSES

A place needs to achieve a level above simply being safe and welcoming for people to want to return to it frequently according to our interviews. They expressed that above and beyond the levels of safe and welcoming is another level – a level of derived value or exchange.

- “If I derive value from being there, I’m more likely to return than if I am simply safe and comfortable.”
- “Why should I come there? If there is nothing I get out of it, then why be there.”
- “You need to stimulate the senses of smell, sound, taste, touch, and vision.”
- “People remember places that stimulate the senses.”
- “When you remember a place, you remember what you saw, smelled, heard, touched or tasted.”

One respondent pointed us to the writings of David Engwicht of Creative Communities International who espouses a theory that the purpose of a city is for exchange. Exchange can be as simple as being in a place and enjoying the sensory aspects of the place. “Even a person who goes to place alone, just to watch people and ponder their own existence is involved in exchange. Their very presence attracts other people, so by being there they are giving something of themselves and gaining as well.”

EVENTUALLY A POP WILL MATURE AND SELF-ACTUALIZE

It became evident in the process of conducting the research that a place becomes a people-oriented place only if it is never considered finished and continues to become the most complete, the fullest place it can be.

- “The unique, interesting and spontaneous are the fundamental reasons people would come to the place.”
- “Maybe subconsciously we manifest that we need to see growth and self-actualization in our cities and if we look at a place that is finished like a Disneyland, sure it is interesting to visit once, twice maybe three times, but when we come back and see the same thing every time then you are looking at something that is static and stagnant and humans are all about movement and growth.”

And, if all these are developed and managed, the place can self actualize.

- “Creating a great place is not about developing an award winning design. It is primarily based on a community’s vision and an excellent management plan. We estimate that about 80 percent of the success of any public space can usually be attributed to its management. No matter how good the design of a space is, it will never become a true place unless it is well managed.”



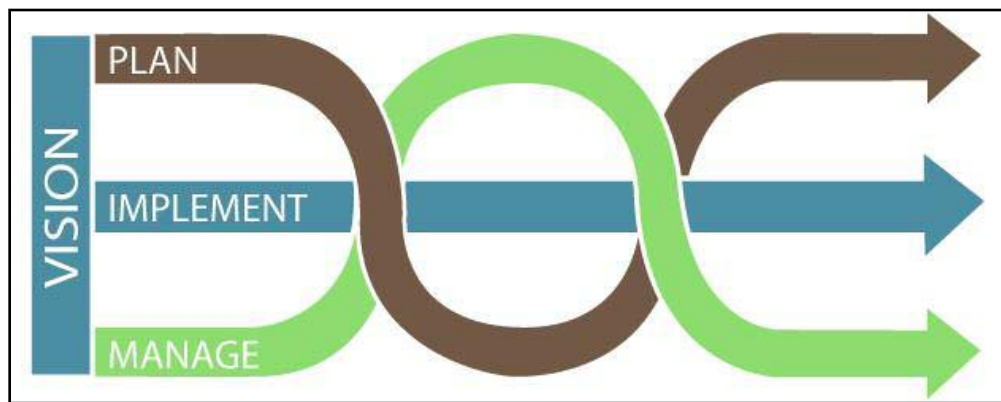
THREE STAGES OF POP DEVELOPMENT MUST COINCIDE

The key to understanding the process of creating and sustaining people-oriented places – to actually succeed in nurturing them to self-actualize – is to understand the stages are sequential, yet happen in parallel.

To manage a place well, you first must be able to envision what it takes to manage it well before the place is created. Then, in turn, you must take the steps necessary to implement that vision across the three stages of successful people-oriented placemaking: planning, implementing and managing.

If a place should never be considered finished, then we safely can say that visioning, planning, implementing and managing are never complete.

Plan, Implement, and Manage Coincidentally



While seemingly simple in its concept, ponder the implications of the three stages of successful people-oriented placemaking working in parallel and continually evolving, wrapping around each other and creating strength. Each stage of the process is of critical importance and must be employed over the life of a place.

- **Visioning:** The vision, we were told, is certainly the first step. However, respondents stated that “You don’t know what you’ll end up with.” This is because as people become attracted to the area, the community grows and changes. “New ideas are introduced and the new visions emerge.” However, the process begins with a clear end in mind. However, as you plan, implement and manage you will amend that design constitution accordingly.
- **Planning:** Contrary to popular belief, planning does not end when building begins. Over and over in the interviews were heard about how “things change as places are developed.” Entrances and public spaces don’t look or work like they were intended. As things change and especially as the community grows and new visions emerge, planning continues.

- **Implementation:** Some respondents stated that “building is finite. You build it and then you are done.” Others countered that because a place is never “done” implementation or the building of a place is never done. Buildings get torn down, new buildings are added, and public spaces are altered or completely transformed.
- **Management:** Decisions about how a place will be managed need to be made very early in the process, respondents told us. “It begins in the visioning and continues in perpetuity.” “You can’t have a sequence of phases without management.” one said. Most importantly, over the life of a place, decisions have to be revisited as the population, the economy and events change perspectives.

VISION IS DERIVED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH PEOPLE

Clearly an important step in the process, the people we spoke with and the literature we reviewed all spoke of the value of including the community in the process of creating and sustaining people-oriented places. As stated previously it is best if the community is involved from the visioning and then throughout the life of the place.

We were told that visioning begins with a process of educating the community.

- “First, everyone has to understand what the language is, what the tools are. Always do it up front. You can’t have a vision until people know what they are going to talk about.”
- “Outreach and education are such an important part of what needs to happen. Often, for whatever reason this doesn’t get done very well.”
- “Community outreach is very hard and very important. We all know we can do better if we communicate with the community.”
- “Community outreach and education go on throughout the lifetime of a community.”
- “You educate them throughout the place making exercise.”

The visioning needs to include discussions of what type of a place people want to create. It begins with a discussion of values.

- “You have to go through an exercise in which you elicit from people their values. They [their values] vary based on where you are. They are based on why they live there. It all begins with the value.”
- “Establish what you want for an area. For example: Do you want a highly successful retail mainstreet? Or do you not have that appetite? You build a strong level of support for that and then discuss how you are going to make that happen.”

During the visioning process, you deal with fear and misperceptions.

- “People will come to workshops planting fear. You need to make sure people focus on what they value. This provides a compass. What we value is where we are going to go with the design.”
- “Visioning is where you can help them understand the relationship between density and some of the macro physical characteristics as well as the site design characteristics. You are creating the buy-in to make changes that without the visioning effort would become controversial.

A critical aspect of visioning is market assessment, with a strong caution to “not get too caught up in how many square feet of retail a place can support.” We heard from our interviewees that the most important things to understand about the market are the cultural and demographic makeup of the area as well as the demographic shifts that are likely to take place.

- “I feel that anyone who gets so involved in measuring what the market will support doesn’t understand how quality of a place will draw people from far, far, far away.”
- “Adding a main street or creating other types of public spaces will change the whole dynamic of the area – give it a whole other aura. Do you do a marketing study for that? I don’t think so.”

IMPLEMENTATION MUST BE STAGED FOR YOUR SITUATION

Respondents told us that during implementation, things won’t work out like you thought they would in the visioning and planning process. Their advice:

- “Don’t blow the vision because you weren’t realistic. It’s important to understand the importance of the quality of the details.”
- Start with small successes: “The fabric is the most important thing. Don’t try to hit home runs. You try to get on base by walking or by a single or whatever. You can’t go in with a fixed development model of this many uses and this many stories of buildings. You have to tailor it to the place and the opportunities that you have. You’ve got to be able to react and you have to acknowledge that your model is going to add things on. You don’t want the place to be finished.”

We were also told how important it is to begin to attract people to the area as soon as possible so you can watch and see how they interact with the place.

- You need to build in such a way that starts to attract immediately. Build around an intersection and halfway down a block. Build toward a central element. Get the corner right. If you don’t have something interesting across the street the glass is half full.

MANAGEMENT MUST BEGIN WITH YOUR VISION

We were also told that there is danger in over-managing or over-programming a space.

- “We have to draw the line. The more we make a place so well managed, so clean we never see our own teenagers, we’ve just made America a lousy place to be. We have to train a lot of managers to put the risk back in. It’s not always the bottom line. The best places are going to be those where we’re not focused on risk management. We need places where people can blend.”
- “People will tell you where they are comfortable sitting and gathering. If you over-program a public space – here’s the conversation pit, here’s the performance area – it tends to drive people away and they won’t use it for what it was programmed.”

You have to think about how a place is going to be managed from the time you begin to plan the place and it has to evolve over time.

- “Ask who is using the place, how it is used and how do people feel when they use it. What resources do you have? Lighting – what is the appropriate level of lighting, what happens at different times of the year with that lighting. You can’t just think about it statically. You have to think about it dynamically and evolving over time.”

And, the management structure has to be of a scale that is appropriate.

- “You have to have an entity or organization that is invested personally as well as financially in that place. You need a governance model that is small enough to be understandable and large enough to have the resources.”
- “It has to be the appropriate size so that it has the resources both financially and enough personnel. It also has to have a structure so the development of a place is not personality driven.
- “Like a child needs a parent. It’s much easier to neglect that child when you have a small group of individuals that are responsible for its nurturing. No one has accountability.”

And, you have to pay attention to the details.

- “You’ve got to manage it to the flows. People like to move. They don’t need to move fast, but they need to have freedom of movement whether it is walking or on a bicycle or in a vehicle and they want to have options. And so, you have to make those movements comfortable.”
- “It takes open mindedness and thoughtfulness to say; okay this is what is happening. How do I respond to that? How do I learn? There are certain things that happen differently every day and every year. You have to step back from that and know there are certain patterns of behavior.
- “When we add or replace elements on the mall it either has to be bullet proof or easily replaceable. It needs to either be timeless and durable or recognize that certain elements are going to be broken or damaged and need to be easily replaced.”
- “When it comes to managing it has all the maintenance, safety, programming the space, other business considerations in mind. Security. Trash. How are you going to get trash trucks in?”