

# The Great Neighborhood Book

A Do-it-Yourself Guide  
to Placemaking

## Chapter 2

# Where Everybody Knows Your Name

How to create great places to hang out



**Stop, look, and listen**



**Enjoy more time out in public**



**Make the most of what you've got**



**Rediscover the front yard**



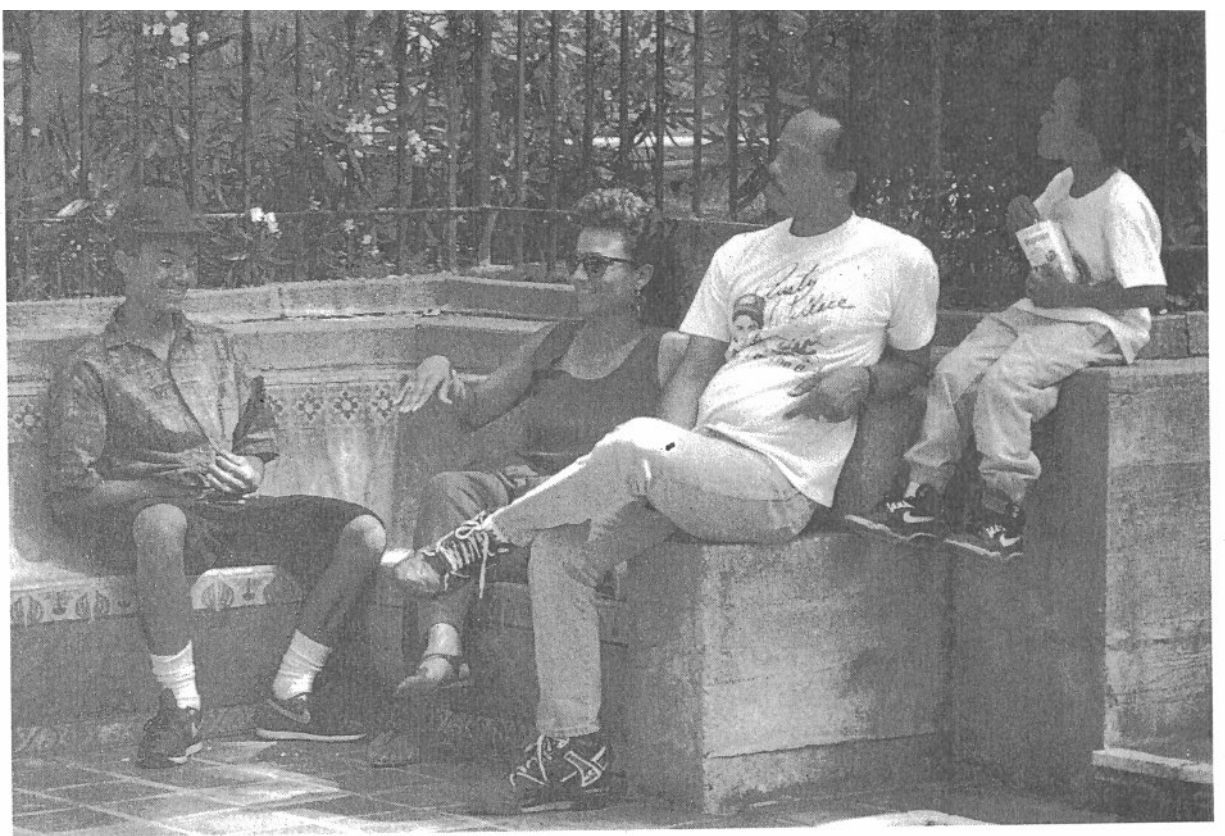
**Offer people a place to sit**



**Tear down fences**



**Think small for big results**



*A family in Riverside, California, takes maximum advantage of a popular public space.*

## Stop, Look, and Listen

The best way to improve a place is to pay close attention to how people use it

It happens all too often. You find yourself in a plaza, park, or business district that has undergone a fancy, highly touted redevelopment — and no one's there. It's sad to see how gobs of money and people's high hopes can go into something that doesn't work out. And it's usually easy to see why it doesn't work. It wasn't designed with the people who would use it in mind. A project can look great on paper and even very impressive in real life when it's completed. It can win all sorts of architecture and planning

awards and still not succeed at its basic mission: creating a place where people want to go.

**"What were they thinking?"** is probably your first reaction to such a place. "They really botched the job!" But flawed thinking is usually not the problem. It goes deeper than that. The real failure was not spending enough time looking at the place and listening to the people who go there. The most brilliantly conceived ideas don't mean much if planners, designers, developers, and even citizens don't do their homework by noticing how people really use a particular place.

In many years of studying how places work in communities all over the world, we at

PPS are constantly surprised by what we see. Take something as simple as a trash can. What could be more straightforward? Well, we often see folks using them for seating. Right away, that tells us that benches are needed in the new plan for that place. We've seen inventive people use trash cans as a desk for writing out checks to pay household bills or as a stove to cook clams.

It's remarkable what you discover when you take time to pay attention. Or as that great American philosopher Yogi Berra once put it, "You can see a lot just by observing."

**New York's Bryant Park is a lovely green expanse** behind the public library at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. On paper, Bryant Park should be a great asset to the city, an oasis of grass and trees amid the skyscrapers of midtown Manhattan. But in the 1980s, few people went there except drug dealers and homeless people. PPS was invited to help with a redevelopment plan for Bryant Park. We spent a lot of time hanging out there, watching what went on and talking to people about what they thought of the place. Our staff interviewed the drug dealers and homeless people to find out what attracted them to the park.

We found that what drug dealers and homeless people liked about Bryant Park was exactly what most other people didn't like. The park entrances were narrow, and it was not

easy to know what was happening inside the park. Indeed, not much was happening, which was why homeless people found it a good place for sleeping. PPS's recommendations to widen the entrance, remove shrubbery that blocked views into the park, and add some stands selling refreshments were implemented as part of a makeover, and now Bryant Park is one of the most well-loved (and well-used) spots in New York.

The same thing can work in your neighborhood. Just spend time in a place that you think could become more of an asset for the community. Hang out there at different times of day, on different days of the week, and in every season and all kinds of weather. Watch what goes on and talk to people who are there. Make a map of how the place is used. Then you'll have a clear picture of what can be done to improve the place.

## RESOURCE

*How to Turn a Place Around*  
(Project for Public Spaces, 2000). Pages 51 to 53 are particularly relevant.

## Make the Most of What You've Got

Public spaces are more than the sum of their parts. Little things can add up to a great place

Take a humble spot in your neighborhood — a bus stop or a branch library — and consider how you could gradually fashion it into a hub of public activity. Add a bench to the bus stop, then a trash receptacle and a drinking fountain, and it changes the whole feel of the corner. A regular Saturday-morning story time, along with a community message board out front and a playground for tots, transforms the library into a community center. Then see what happens at either location when a coffee shop with sidewalk tables opens, some public art is created, and vendors arrive selling ice cream or garden produce. *Voilà!* You've got a great hangout, a place you'll visit even when you're not taking the bus or looking for a book. You show up because you know something will be happening there.

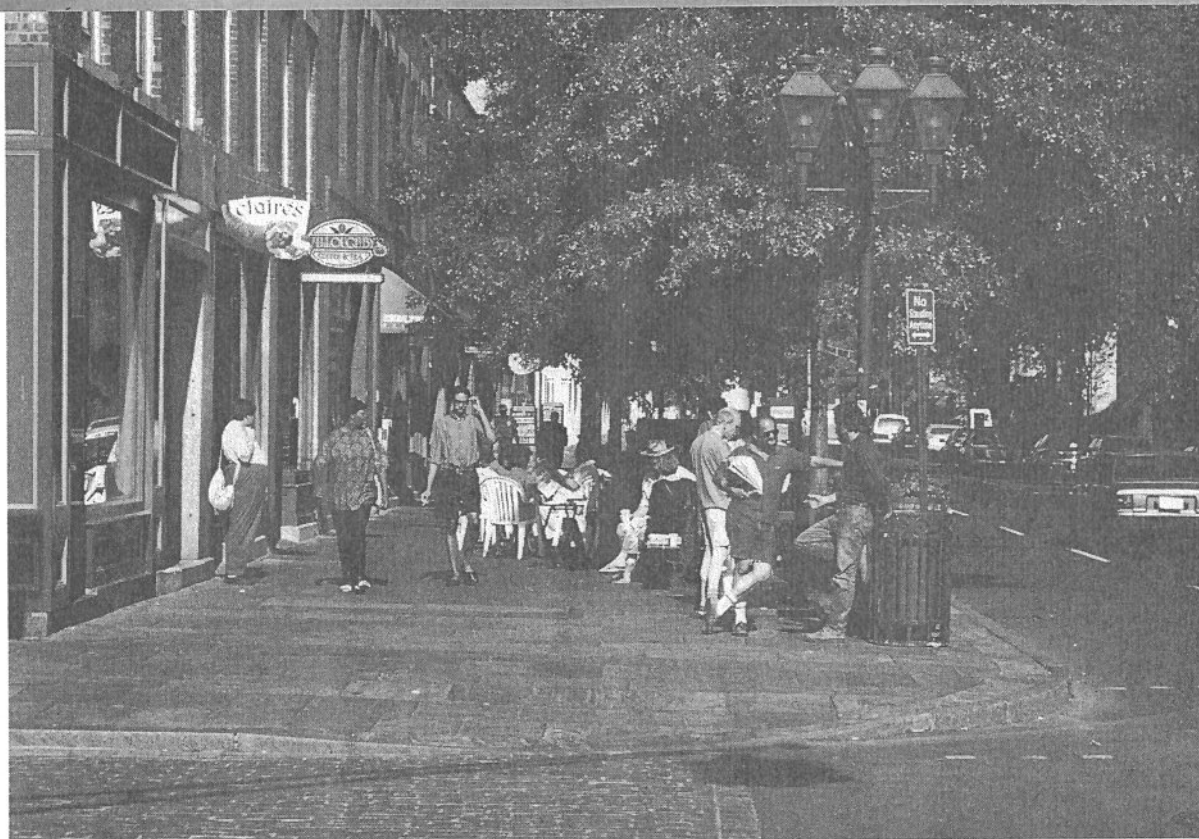
This phenomenon is known as triangulation. This simply refers to the way elements in a public place build on one another, creating something more than the sum of its parts. It's synergy. At PPS, we call it the Power of Ten, meaning that if there are at least ten things you can do in a particular spot, it will likely become a popular destination for people in the neighborhood. This is the principle behind the world's favorite places. St. Mark's Square in Venice is really just a public square near the water with a church, coffee shops, and lots of pigeons. Yet the way these

things work together make it one of the most romantic destinations on earth.

**You could create a version of Piazza San Marco in your own community.** Maybe tourist guidebooks will never write it up, but you will be able to enjoy it each day. Take a vacant lot and turn it into a junior version of the Boston Common, as a neighborhood group did on Dudley Street in Boston's Roxbury district. The Portland, Oregon-based group City Repair Project advocates that every neighborhood have its own public square. City Repair specializes in turning intersections into public gathering places, such as the big red labyrinth painted at the corner of Southeast 19<sup>th</sup> and Washington, with a herb garden and public benches nearby. Or the shrine to La Virgen de Guadalupe at Southeast 8<sup>th</sup> and Ankeny, on a corner where Mexican day laborers wait to be picked up for jobs. City Repair's ideas are now being embraced by groups in Seattle and Olympia, Washington; State College, Pennsylvania; and Asheville, North Carolina.

**If it works on Chapel Street, a place folks avoided in New Haven, it can work anywhere.** Once a thriving business district, Chapel Street was devastated by the urban decline that hit New Haven, Connecticut, particularly hard. By the early 1980s, only 5 percent of the area's residential and commercial spaces were occupied.





Almost everyone had given up on the place.

But not Joel Schiavone, a savvy and stubborn developer who saw potential where others saw only blight. Schiavone took a close look at the small things that, taken together, could transform the neighborhood. Indeed, he says it was always his goal to turn the area around without making it look any different. He convinced city officials to undo the damage of an earlier street-widening project by expanding the sidewalks so that Chapel Street felt like a place you'd want to hang out. Soon, a café expanded with outdoor seating, two more cafés opened, and a newspaper vendor set up shop. There are now nightclubs, restaurants, several theaters, and

shops selling everything from bicycles to jewelry.

"The whole thing is like a mosaic," Schiavone explains. "Each piece needs to be carefully considered: street furniture, flowerboxes, a particular tenant for a storefront, tree plantings. If it's done right, all these things come together to create a real neighborhood."

## RESOURCES

City Repair Project:  
[www.cityrepair.org](http://www.cityrepair.org)

*City Repair's Placemaking Guidebook* (City Repair Project, 2003)

Chapel Street: "Chapel Street,"  
[www.pps.org/gps](http://www.pps.org/gps)

*Almost given up for dead in the 1980s, Chapel Street in New Haven, Connecticut, sprang back to life thanks to modest improvements like trees, trash receptacles, and a wider sidewalk.*

## Offer People a Place to Sit

Any gathering spot will become more lively if folks have a comfortable spot to relax

A key ingredient of lively, safe, fun neighborhoods is public spaces where people will spontaneously gather. People out on the streets bring a community magically alive. You get to know your neighbors, you feel secure, and you have a place to hang out.

And there's one simple way to do this: give everyone a spot where they can sit down. A bench or chairs can transform a lonely space into a lively place.

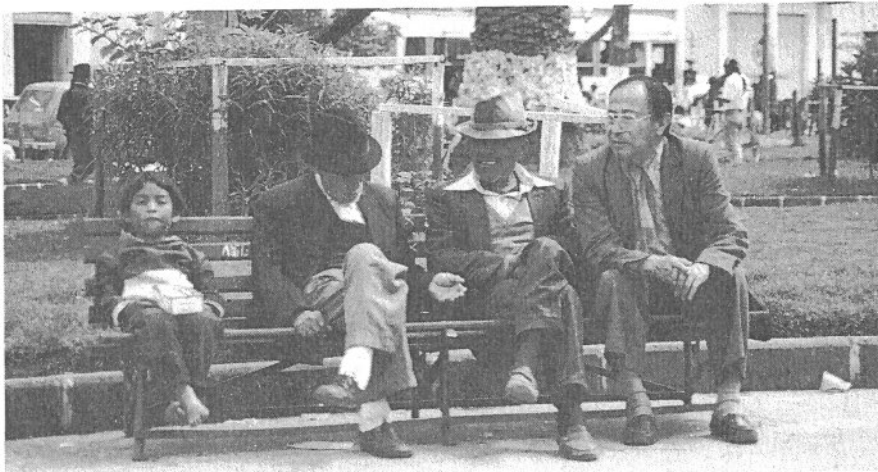
People out walking or out shopping will stop to rest their legs. Others will then sit down, and conversations will arise. Soon people will make a point of heading there, knowing they'll find company.

**That's the basic principle behind the charming squares in Latin American or European cities.** You can spend a pleasurable afternoon just sitting in Rome's Piazza Navona or Prague's Old Town Square or Mexico City's Plaza Hidalgo, soaking up all the life happening around you. Think how much more fun this would be in your own community, where the intriguing people passing by are your neighbors.

The same principle is at work in the town commons of New England, the courthouse squares in small towns throughout the South and Midwest, and the bustling outdoor shopping streets of many suburbs such as Santa Monica, California, or Oak Park, Illinois.

This principle also holds true in the largest and busiest cities of the world. One of the first jobs Project for Public Spaces worked on was at

*People everywhere are looking for a comfortable place to watch the world pass.*



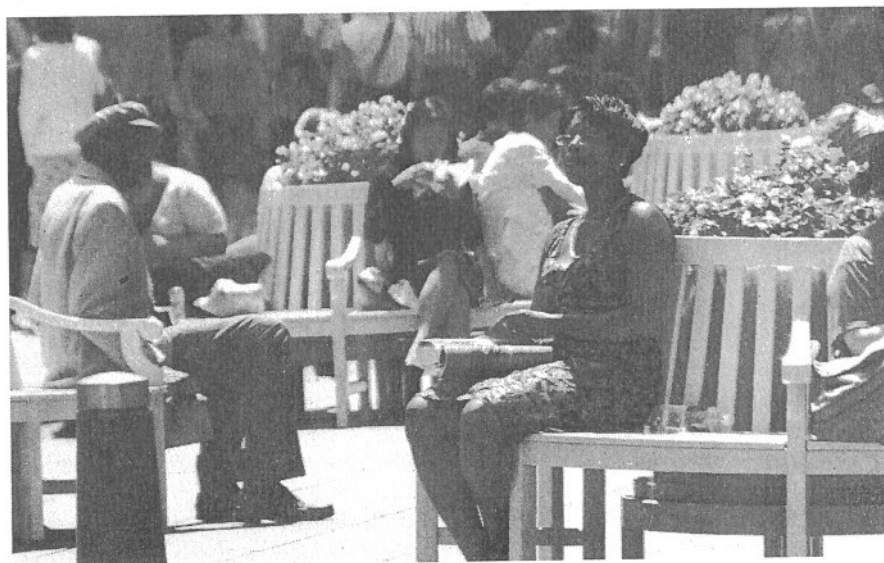
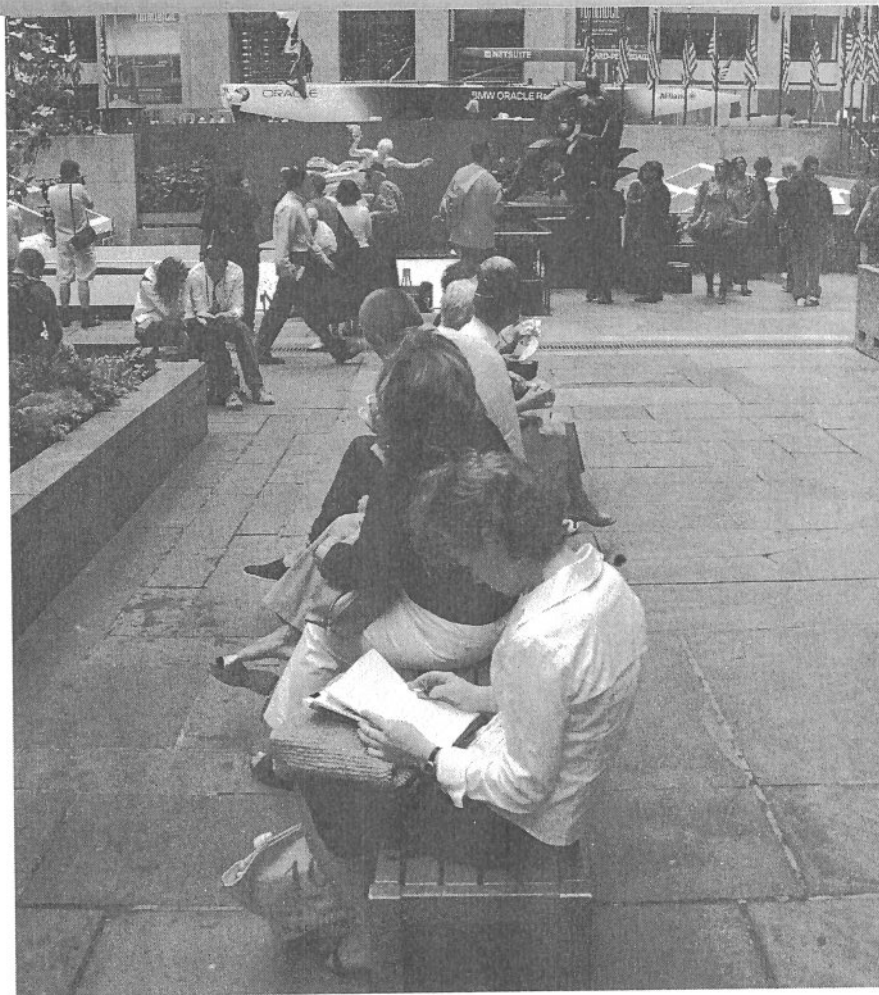
Rockefeller Center, the huge complex conceived in the 1930s as the town square for Manhattan. Today this is one of New York's most beloved spots, even though it is technically a private space. It's a favorite place where shoppers can rest in between Fifth Avenue stores, where office workers can nibble a snack, and where out-of-town visitors can catch their breath amid all the hustle and bustle.

But 30 years ago, the Center's managers weren't quite sure if they wanted the public hanging out there. They sought PPS's help to prevent people from sitting on ledges in the Channel Gardens, which leads to the famous skating rink. Specifically, they wanted to know what kind of spikes would work best to discourage would-be sitters.

Observing the area over a period of days, we concluded that people seeking a place to sit posed no problems at all and actually enhanced the experience of walking through the space. Instead of spikes, we suggested adding benches to the ledges of the Channel Gardens' planters, which could then be filled with flowers and decorations year-round. The managers followed our advice, and it changed the whole nature of the place. Now Rockefeller Center is full of people chatting and resting, resembling the town square it was meant to be.

## RESOURCE

Rockefeller Center: "Channel Gardens," [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)

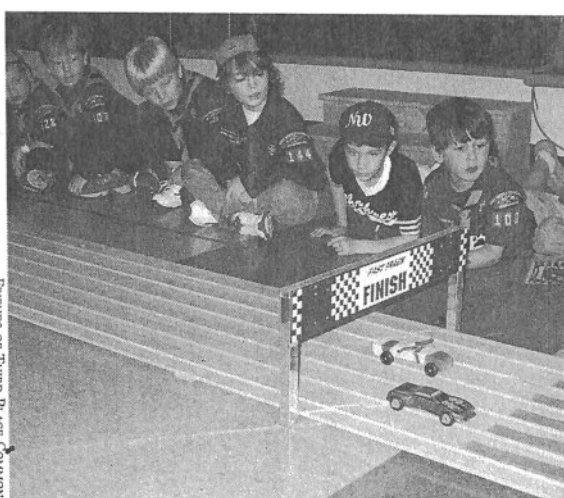




FRIENDS OF THIRD PLACE COMMONS



FRIENDS OF THIRD PLACE COMMONS



## More than a shopping mall

Lake Forest Park, Washington

One day a few years ago, Anne Stadler was in line to order lunch at the Town Center Mall in suburban Seattle when she overheard two men next to her lamenting the state of business. When she realized they were talking about her favorite part of the mall, Third Place Commons, she introduced herself. One of the men was a community-minded developer, Ron Sher, who had bought the failing shopping mall with the intention of turning it into a community gathering place. Sher, who had been inspired by *The Great Good Place*, a book by sociologist Ray Oldenburg that extols the benefits of meeting places outside the home and the workplace, had established a store in the mall, Third Place Books, which sat next to a large commons with a stage and cafés. The bookstore and the commons immediately became a haven for local families, who had a new reason to visit the once-dreary mall.

After this chance meeting, Stadler was struck by an idea: Why not have the community that

loves the Commons get involved in supporting and running it? She ran the idea by Sher, who agreed to donate the Commons area and stage to a new nonprofit that would fund and manage the space. Thus was born Friends of Third Place Commons, a public/private partnership that includes the City of Lake Forest Park; the local arts council, library and community college; and a host of other nonprofit and educational community groups.

Today the Commons hosts a staggering variety of community events, including cooking lessons, club meetings, sports team parties, theatrical and musical performances, and art exhibitions. It has become a much-loved gathering place for the whole community, from college students to families with young children to seniors.

### RESOURCE

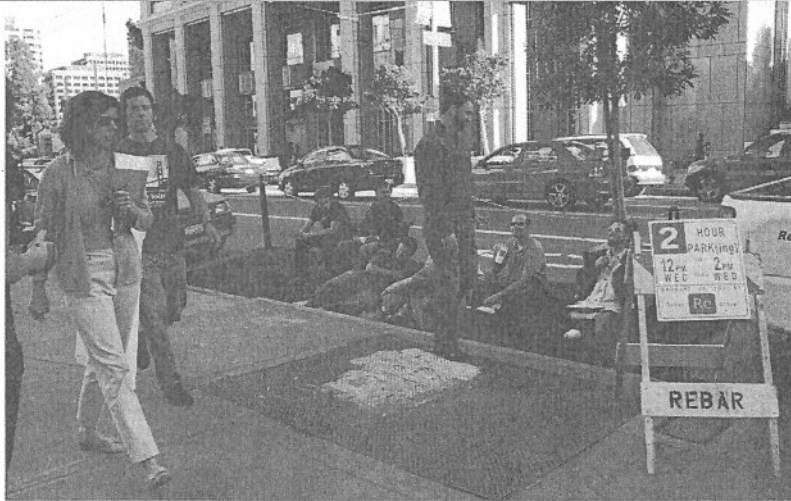
Third Place Commons:

[www.thirdplacebooks.com](http://www.thirdplacebooks.com)

[www.thirdplacecommons.org](http://www.thirdplacecommons.org)

*The Great Good Place* by Ray Oldenburg (Paragon House, 1989)

Once a failing shopping mall, Third Place Commons in Lake Forest Park, Washington, is now the pulsing heart of a suburban town.



## Making paradise out of a parking spot

San Francisco, California

What's the best way to use a parking place? Conventional wisdom says "to park a car," but a group of activists known as Rebar has a different answer: to create much-needed public space. One afternoon in November 2005, Rebar fed the meter at a San Francisco parking spot and brought a new meaning to the word "park" by constructing a temporary green space complete with grass, a shade tree, and a bench. The project, dubbed "PARK(ing)," demonstrated how space for storing private vehicles, such as parking spots, can be altered to serve a more human purpose.

More than 70 percent of outdoor space in downtown San Francisco is dedicated to private vehicles, while only a small fraction is reserved for the public realm. Rebar chose the site for PARK(ing) by identifying an area that was underserved by public parks yet received plenty of sunshine. To install the temporary park, the activists "leased" a parking space and then unfurled

200 square feet of sod. Next they set down an old park bench and a 24-inch planter containing a tree. They posted a sign on the parking meter announcing that the grassy patch was open for public use, then began to receive visitors. The temporary park remained open from noon to 2 p.m.

Rebar sees PARK(ing) as a relatively simple exercise that other people could replicate in their own communities. It hopes the unusual sight of a parking spot transformed into a small public park will encourage people to question how public space is apportioned between cars and people. So far, groups in Trapani, Italy, and Santa Monica, California, have been inspired to install their own variations of PARK(ing). On September 21, 2006, Rebar staged the first PARK(ing) Day in San Francisco; more than a dozen local groups reclaimed parking spaces throughout the city in different ways.

### RESOURCE

Rebar: [www.rebargroup.org](http://www.rebargroup.org)

## SUCCESS STORY

*Creative community activists in San Francisco turned a parking space into a temporary park, drawing attention to the fact that 70 percent of public space downtown is reserved for cars, not people.*

## Think Small for Big Results

Remarkable things happen when you plant a patch of petunias

Project for Public Spaces has distilled what it learned from its work in communities around the world into "11 Principles for Creating Great Community Places." Most of the advice centers on practical matters like "Have a vision," "The community is the expert," and "Form supports function," but one principle simply states, "Start with the petunias."

Petunias? What the heck do petunias have to do with the important business of making your neighborhood great? Well, actually quite a lot. Flowers can brighten up any place, whether it's the dowdy main street in a small town, a squalid vacant lot in an urban ghetto, or a dreary sidewalk near a suburban strip mall. And the presence of petunias or any other bloom reassures passersby that someone is committed to planting, watering, and weeding the flowerbed.

**Civic groups in Shelburne Falls, a small town in Massachusetts, made the most of a bad situation** by creating floral displays on a downtown bridge that had been abandoned when rail service shut down. That was in 1928, and the Bridge of Flowers has since become an attraction that draws attention and thousands of tourists to this out-of-the-way town.

But flowers do more than please the eye. They can lift a community's spirit and provide tangible proof that things are looking up. Planting flowers is a great way for a community to take that all-important first step.

"In creating or changing a public space, small improvements help to garner support along the way to the end result," writes PPS vice-president Kathy Madden in the book *How to Turn a Place Around*. "They indicate visible change and show that someone is in charge. Petunias, which are low cost and easy to plant, have an immediate visible impact. On the other hand, once planted, they must be watered and cared for. Therefore, these flowers give a clear message that someone must be looking after the place."

**In New York, volunteers plant more than 3 million daffodils in parks each year.**

Originally conceived to commemorate September 11, the Daffodil Project now splashes color and raises spirits at more than 1,300 sites across the city, highlighting the potential for reclaiming neglected parks and other public spaces.

Harvard Business School professor John Kotter, who studies the dynamics of change, notes that people who succeed in improving things at a corporation, organization, or community "look for avenues that will produce some short-term wins, some visible changes that are associated with their effort, within six or 12 months. This gives them credibility and discourages the cynics .... Change of any magnitude tends to take time, so short-term wins are essential and must be an integral part of the long-term strategy."

Not all small actions leading to large results start with flowers. One exemplary project used white paint. Mulry Square was a dangerous intersection where three streets met in New York's Greenwich Village. Neighbors had long urged local officials to make the spot safer for pedestrians. Working with the New York City Department of Transportation and neighbors, PPS proposed an ambitious plan of traffic calming, tree plantings, and reconstructing the space to better serve people on foot. The city balked at making such big changes so rapidly, but it agreed to apply paint to create striped crosswalks between all the corners and to expand the space available to pedestrians. This demonstration project proved how well the proposed safety improvements worked, winning a commitment from the city to carry out the project.

"By experimenting with simple, visible, temporary actions like painting lines in the street, we were able to show the city how larger investments could pay off," explains Shirley Secunda, a member of the local community board.

## RESOURCES

11 Principles for Creating Great Community Places: "11 Steps," [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)

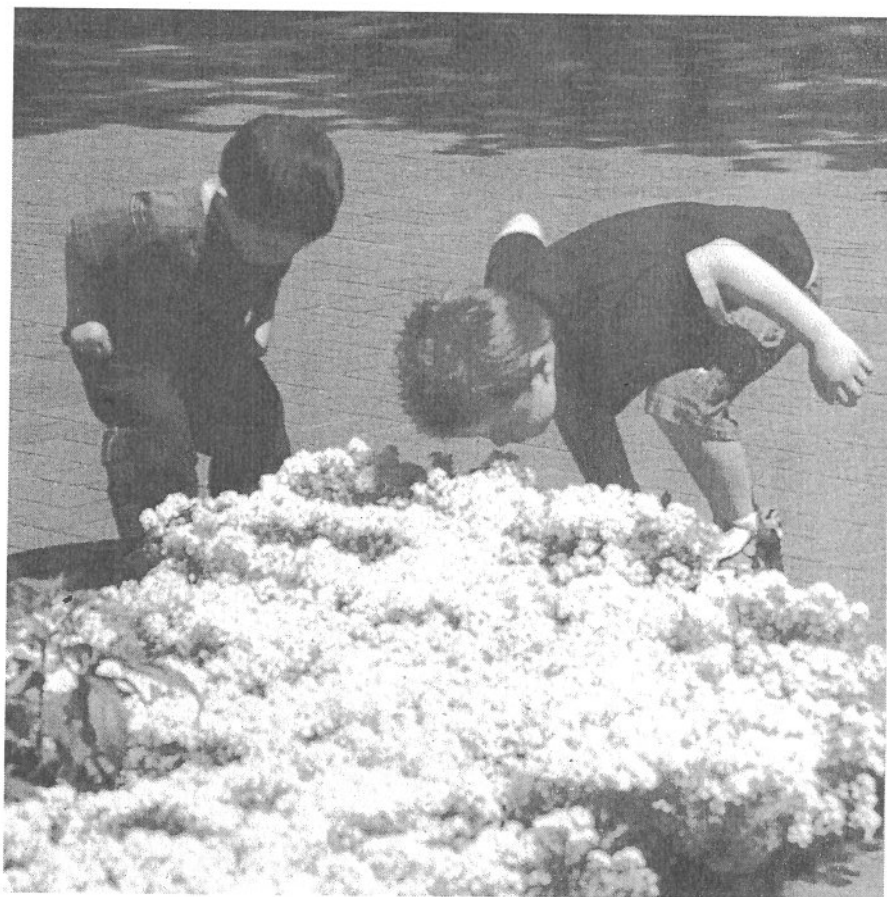
*How to Turn a Place Around* (Project for Public Spaces, 2000)

Shelburne Falls Bridge of Flowers: "Bridge of Flowers," [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)

The Daffodil Project: [www.ny4p.org](http://www.ny4p.org)

Mulry Square: "Mulry Square," [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)

*Kids intuitively understand what makes a great place, like these boys having a ball in Portland's Pioneer Square.*





## Enjoy More Time Out in Public

Wireless Internet and mobile phones offer new opportunities to indulge in café society

A hundred years ago, public spaces were central to everyone's lives. Jan Gehl, architecture professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, explains how walking the streets and riding public transit were the only ways to get around town. Markets and shopping districts were the only places to purchase food and other necessities. Parks, taverns, churches, and the street itself were where

people conducted their social lives, where they would meet with friends and neighbors.

But a chain of technological changes through the 20<sup>th</sup> century gave us less and less reason to leave our homes. Cars, telephones, radios, record players, refrigerators, televisions, air conditioners, VCRs, and computers transformed our daily lives to the point where many folks wonder if we need public places at all. But, as Kathy Madden of PPS notes, "The street, the square, the park, the market, the playground are the river of life. We are now rediscovering how essential they are to our well-being."

Citizens everywhere are clamoring for the chance to comfortably and conveniently gather in public. The last few years have seen an explosion in new or revitalized waterfronts, public markets, bike trails, parks, squares, shopping streets, libraries, and other places where people can mingle with one another. The new Campus Martius Park in Detroit is bringing life back downtown. Corpus Christi, Texas, created a bus transfer station that has become an unlikely social hub of the city. New coffee shops and sidewalk cafés are blossoming in towns and neighborhoods across the land.

It now appears that a new generation of technological breakthroughs can enhance, rather than diminish, our opportunities to participate in public life. Mobile phones,

*Technological breakthroughs can enhance public life.*



instant messaging, laptop computers, and wireless Internet make it possible to enjoy an afternoon in a café or park doing work that once confined us to office or home, notes Matt Blackett, a 33-year-old public-space advocate from Toronto. He explores these kinds of ideas in *Spacing*, a magazine devoted to public-space issues in Toronto.

**You have the chance to be plugged into the world and your community at the same time.** You can set up shop for a few hours at the library, a café, corner bar, or even a playground. Surf the Internet, catch up on your e-mail, and chat with friends or associates across the country while bumping into your neighbors and watching the interesting rhythms of daily life unfold. Who says you can't have the best of both worlds?

## RESOURCES

*Spacing* magazine:

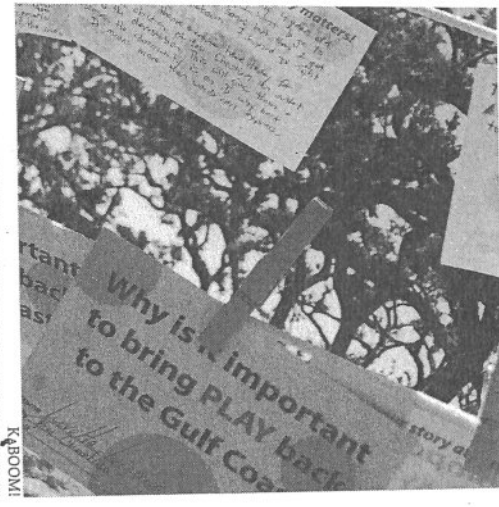
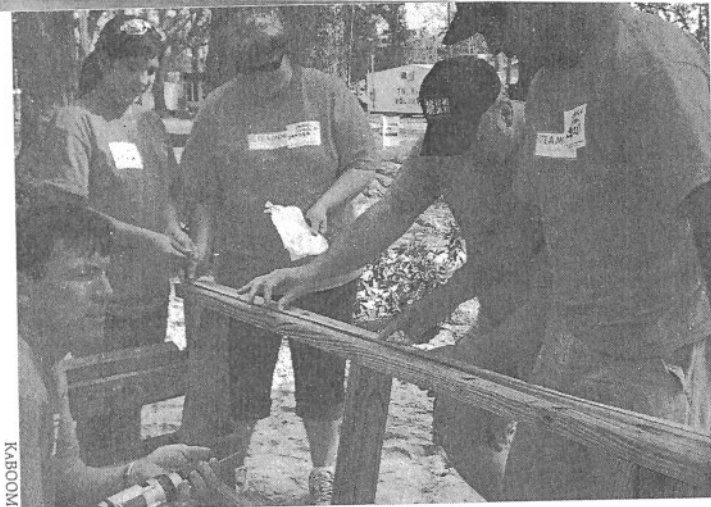
[www.spacing.ca](http://www.spacing.ca)

Jan Gehl: [www.gehlarchitects.dk](http://www.gehlarchitects.dk)

Campus Martius: "Campus Martius," [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)

Corpus Christi Staples Street Station: "Corpus Christi," [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)

*Although devastated by Hurricane Katrina, people in Pass Christian, Mississippi, didn't give up on their town. They pooled their talents to rebuild a local park according to plans mapped out by local kids.*



## A playground for the whole town

*Pass Christian, Mississippi*

When both Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita swept through Pass Christian, Mississippi (population 2,000), they leveled the town's War Memorial Park. The park's modest but popular playground became a rallying point for the community in its determination to recover from the disaster. Assisted by the national nonprofit KaBOOM! which helps communities build imaginative places for children to play, the people of Pass Christian made War Memorial Park a catalyst for the town's renewal.

The first step was to hold a "design day," where local children were asked to draw their dream playgrounds. For the next eight weeks, the community worked with KaBOOM!, corporate sponsor Home Depot, and other partners to produce a design for War Memorial Park based on the dream playgrounds. One particular project commemorated the hurricanes with a uniquely personal touch. Families donated their china, which had been destroyed by Katrina, and children

used the broken pieces to create mosaic stepping stones.

The park's rebirth culminated on "build day," when volunteers constructed the entire playground in one day. All told, 550 volunteers from Pass Christian and neighboring towns came together to help in the planning and construction. "The process helped unite the community and neighboring communities," says KaBOOM!'s Sarah Pinsky. "Before the storm, communities were so independent, but now they are helping each other, sharing resources, and supporting each other's efforts in rebuilding."

Today, War Memorial Park is a real community place. Local businesses have located right next to the park. At lunch, all the benches are full. All community events are now held there. And children, families, and people from different walks of life use the playground at all times.

### RESOURCE

KaBOOM! [www.kaboom.org](http://www.kaboom.org)



## How skateboarders saved a park

Tacoma, Washington

Until recently, city officials in Tacoma, Washington, cracked down on skateboarding in parks by installing skate-prevention devices (commonly called Skate-Stoppers, the name of a leading brand), often with disastrous results. Illicit activity increased in Thea's Park on the waterfront after the city put Skate-Stoppers at a popular skateboarding spot there. Without the skateboarders, fewer people used the park, and graffiti, broken glass, and drug-dealing all increased. In 2005, Peter Whitley, Brock McNally, and Matthew Levens — a group of skateboarding advocates — approached the parks department with a commonsense solution: Revive the park by reintroducing skateboarding. City officials were ready to listen because they recognized the park was in a downward spiral. Working together, the advocates and the city removed the Skate-Stoppers and established a regular inspection and cleanup routine.

This success story represents a big departure from strategies that have prevailed since the 1970s, when skateboarding in public spaces was first looked upon as an act of vandalism. "Now that skaters are interacting

with each other and rebuilding communities disrupted by a lack of gathering places," says Whitley, "many are seeing that it's possible to address the 'public image' damage done during the '80s by creating skateboarding spaces that allow for non-skateboarding uses simultaneously."

Today, Thea's Park is clean and used for many different activities, including kite-flying, picnics, dog-walking, and kayak launches. It benefits from the presence of skateboarders, who look out for the park and are appreciated by other park users. Tacoma is now looking at designing another mixed-use space that would allow skateboarding, but not to the exclusion of other activities. In any community, collaboration between the skateboarding community, park planners, and city officials can create popular public spaces that generate youthful energy.

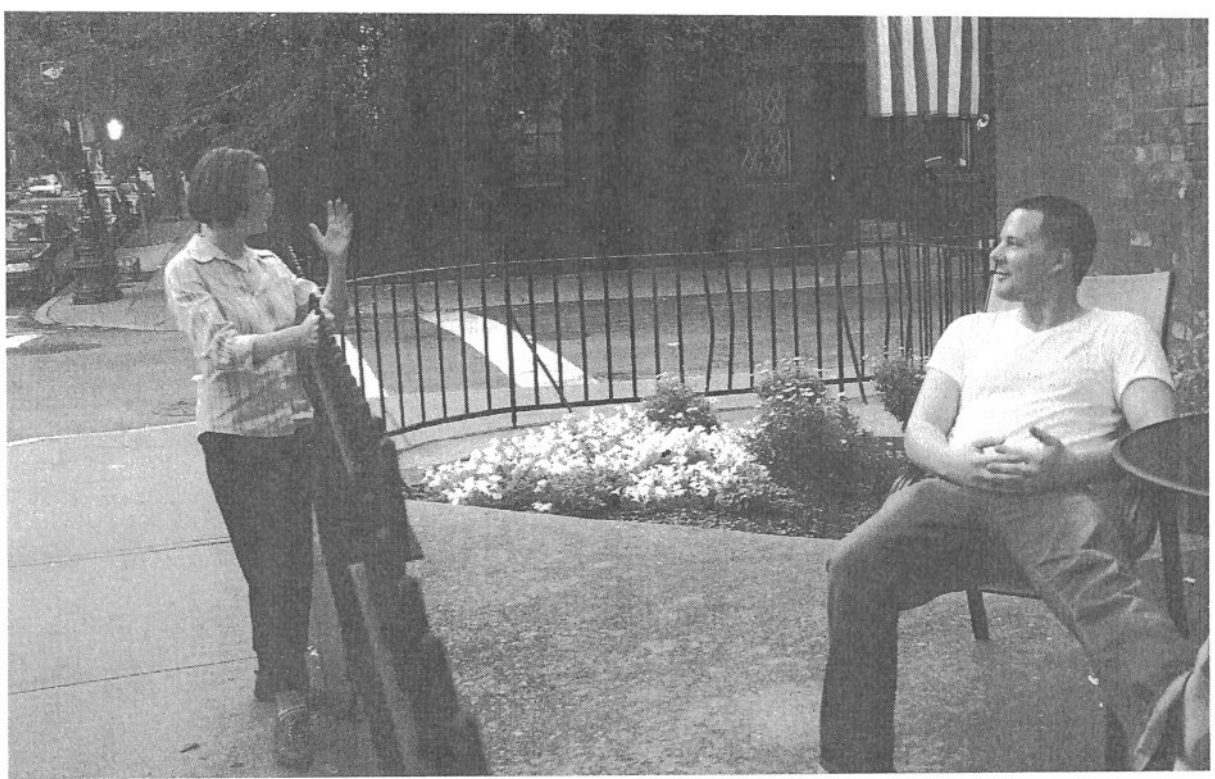
### RESOURCES

Tacoma Skateparks:  
[tacomaskateparks.org](http://tacomaskateparks.org)  
 Skaters for Public Skateparks:  
[www.skatersforpublicskateparks.org](http://www.skatersforpublicskateparks.org)

*Skateboard enthusiasts in Tacoma, Washington, proved to local authorities that their presence in a waterfront park actually reduced crime and encouraged non-skaters to visit. That's when the "no skating" signs came down.*

SUCCESS STORY





*A man relishes the social benefits of his front yard.*

## Rediscover the Front Yard

Rather than hiding out back, greet the world from your porch or stoop

We usually think of public space as places where everyone goes, like a park or a business district. But Danish architecture professor Jan Gehl, who for the past 40 years has been researching how people use cities, notes there are several distinct kinds of public spaces.

- Parks, downtowns, the library, or a farmers market qualify as fully public spaces. Anyone is free to go there and do what they wish (within reason).
- Front yards and residential sidewalks, on the other hand, are semi-public spaces. You are permitted to be there, but only for short periods and specific purposes. Such places

often serve as informal gathering spots, but you could not just sit down to play music or read a book the way you might in a park.

- A flower patch, porch, or stoop at the front of a residence is a semi-private place. A stranger can appreciate it and even call out hello to a resident, but it's not acceptable to actually enter the space unless invited.
- A backyard is generally thought of as private space, the same as the house itself.

Some historians have noted that the gradual shift of outdoor life at home from the front porch to the back patio is a key element in our declining sense of community. Indeed, after World War II, front porches

disappeared from houses altogether. They were replaced in many new communities by the dull, blank wall of garage doors.

**Thankfully, front porches are back in fashion today** as a distinguishing architectural feature on many new houses. But more than a status symbol, a front porch is a great place to hang out. You can greet your neighbors, make new acquaintances, and keep an eye on what's going on down the block. It's a wonderful spot to eat meals in the warmer months and set up a reading lamp and comfy chairs to catch the cool evening breezes.

There are certainly times when we might prefer the privacy of the backyard, but too often going there becomes a reflexive habit when we'd really prefer to be part of what's happening in the world around us.

**Sitting on the stoop is a great city pastime** that has become endangered as new buildings dispense with front stoops altogether or make them so small as to be useless. If you are lucky enough to have one, celebrate it as a place to read the newspaper, drink a beer, gaze at the stars, or sit down next to a neighbor to view the passing parade of life.

**In Minneapolis, among other places, the front yard is regaining its rightful position as a center of community activity.** A few years ago, an arts organization went to work building handsome Adirondack chairs, painting them bright

green and giving them to people who promised to lounge in them in the front yard. The Open Eye Figure Theatre, which works primarily with puppets, launched a summer neighborhood tour in which local families offered their front yards for performances and invited all the kids in the neighborhood.

Jean Johnson and Niel Ritchie built a beautiful second-story deck looking over their backyard in Minneapolis's East Harriet neighborhood. It was a wonderful place to relax, but they often felt cut off from the life of the neighborhood. So they constructed a front yard patio, complete with wooden lawn furniture and a fire pit, that soon became the scene of frequent parties and countless impromptu conversations. "It changed our lives in big ways," Johnson says. "We felt much better plugged in to everything that was happening."

They have since downsized to a smaller house — with a great front porch, Johnson notes — and another family is spending its summer, and even spring and autumn, evenings out in the front yard.

## RESOURCES

Jan Gehl: *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space* (Danish Architectural Press, 2001)

Open Eye Figure Theatre:  
[www.openeyetheatre.org](http://www.openeyetheatre.org)

## Tear Down the Fences

Sharing backyard space creates a comfy neighborhood commons

In many neighborhoods, backyards once served as something of a town green where kids could toss Frisbees, play tag, and run back and forth between each other's houses. The area closest to each home still retained a private feel, but the clotheslines often marked the end of strictly private property and the start of a semi-public zone. You still see this in some small towns, but in most bigger communities the neighborhood commons has been enclosed.

**Around Seattle, architect Ross Chaplin is helping revive the custom of a town green** with the popular cottage communities he designs. At the Greenwood Avenue Cottages in Shoreline, Washington, eight houses with small fenced yards open onto a shared commons with flowers, fruit trees, a lawn, and a community building with a workshop and party room.

**People in the Federal Hill neighborhood of inner-city Baltimore created cozy backyard greens** by tearing down the fences. Residents of 11 row houses came together to create Chandlers Yard, a tree-shaded courtyard where residents now relax with coffee and the morning paper or sit down for a chat with the neighbors. It features a landscaped path and a flagstone terrace with a patio table. The commons has caused a significant leap in property values on the block, but most Chandlers Yard residents don't care — they aren't moving anywhere.

**In the Washington Street neighborhood of Boulder, Colorado, Vivian and Dominique Getliffe** decided to plant a garden together with their next-door neighbors. It became a catalyst to bring the whole block together. Eight families now share the garden and a common yard. Big potluck picnic dinners, planned and unplanned, are now a regular occurrence on Washington Street. "Private yards with fences allow us to push the world away," resident Dan Diehl told the authors of *Superbia!* a book about improving suburban living. "But the more you push it away, the lonelier you are."

If you're interested in creating your own backyard Eden, you'll find a wealth of information and inspiration at the website of Community Greens, a joint project of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Ashoka, an organization promoting social innovation. The Community Greens site is packed with details and photos of successful projects. "When they are well-designed and well-managed, community greens have remarkable benefits," the site declares. Such backyard greens can provide:

- Accessible and safe play areas for kids.
- A heightened sense of community as neighbors are drawn together to create, manage, protect, and enjoy their backyard commons.

- A relaxing spot to hang out, either by yourself or with neighbors.
- Increased safety and security because neighbors can look after each other more effectively than they can with privacy fences blocking the view.
- Improved stability because people on blocks with community greens move less often and are more likely to invest in improvements to their own house and yard.
- Environmental improvements as people cooperate to plant gardens and trees, which in turn reduce stormwater runoff and provide habitat for birds and other small animals.
- An attractive alternative to sprawl by making living in cities and built-up suburbs more attractive, especially to families with children.

## RESOURCES

Ross Chapin Architects:  
[www.rosschapin.com](http://www.rosschapin.com)

Community Greens:  
[www.communitygreens.org](http://www.communitygreens.org)  
 (Includes the story on Chandler's Yard and other projects)

*Superbia! 31 Ways to Create Sustainable Neighborhoods* by Dan Chiras and Dave Wann (New Society Publishers, 2003)

*Young people in Amsterdam greet the world with a splashy party rather than a forbidding fence.*

