

P1 PRIDE OF Place

Fred Kent has spent three decades developing a common-sense approach to streets, buildings and human sociability.

In a city accustomed to money, glitz and bold statements, the new Time Warner Center strives to impress. Fronting on Columbus Circle in midtown Manhattan, the immense development houses not only the headquarters and broadcast facilities of the conglomerate for which it is named, but dozens of stores, almost 200 condominiums, seven restaurants catering to people who spend hundreds of dollars on a meal, and a high-end supermarket. It has 73 elevators and six separate postal addresses.

Not surprisingly, *le tout* New York swooned when it opened last year. "It's a real asset to the city," declared the well-known architect and building maven Robert A.M. Stern. "Aesthetic reservations pale into insignificance," gushed the New York *Sun's* architecture critic, "before the immense urban success of the structure as a whole."

Oh please, grumbles Fred Kent. "This is a dead building. This is a



bunch of advertising panels behind glass... There's no life here, no public gathering spaces, no cafés, no street activity." The "street life" engendered by the Time Warner building, Kent points out, is actually inside and down an escalator—at the Whole Foods Market, where there's a crowd of people shopping

and gabbing. "The building's designers hate it when you say this, but all this is, is a shopping mall."

Kent is not an architect, but he does pay close attention to buildings—and above all, to the way they affect the street. As the president of the Project for Public Spaces, which is based in Manhattan's West Village, he has for the past 30 years been a buoyant and unrelenting advocate for creating outdoor spaces in which people like to linger. "It's just basic human common sense," he says. "We need places that people feel com-

fortable in and connect to, that they can be affectionate in, smile, laugh, engage, tell stories. It's about bliss, really." The Time Warner Center may be about a lot of things, but bliss is not among them.

It is unlikely that Fred Kent's poor estimation of their work is causing any of those responsible for the Time Warner building to toss and turn at night. Elsewhere, on the other

By Rob Gurwitt

JAMIE WATTS



REPRINTED WITH
PERMISSION FROM:

GOVERNING

April 2005, vol. 18, no. 7

People are attracted to clutter and variety. The small stores inspire more pedestrians than a single "super store" would.

Minimal traffic capacity of the street creates a quiet, pleasant environment for pedestrians.



hand, Kent's opinions carry great sway these days with a surprising number of people who shape the places where we spend our time. The transit agency in San Mateo County, California—SamTrans—has engaged Kent to help it figure out how to remake El Camino Real, the soulless paved spine running through the communities of the Bay Area's Peninsula. In New Jersey, the state department of transportation has so embraced Kent's beliefs about public space that it offers the unheard-of spectacle of a cadre of traffic engineers bent on transforming the way the state thinks about its roads. In Seattle, Corpus Christi and Philadelphia, a plethora of organizations ranging from the federal General Services Administration to municipal agencies to neighborhood groups to civic institutions are working with Kent to create or retrofit the spaces for which they are responsible so that people will want to spend time there.

They have come to Kent in part because he and his compatriots at PPS—especially his partner, Kathy Madden, and his longtime colleague, Steve Davies—have a track record of making some of the most appealing urban spots in the nation. They did the redesign of Manhattan's hugely popular Bryant Park, which sits next to the New York Public Library and which, before they got hold of it, had become a no-man's-land of drug dealers

and muggers. They helped make the area around Rockefeller Center's skating rink the people-watching Mecca it has become.

More recently, they helped create the template for Campus Martius, the astoundingly successful new park that opened last November in the heart of downtown Detroit. "A lot of suburbanites will take pride in telling you exactly how long it's been since they crossed into Detroit," says Neal Rubin, a columnist for the *Detroit News*. "Campus Martius, even in the dead of winter, has become a magnet. It's a gathering place and a rallying point in a city that's been low on both."

Over the years, Kent and Madden have amassed a large, diverse collection of the little details that add up to public spaces people are drawn to or repelled by. They have spent years in minute study of how people use space—time-lapse films of parking spaces and traffic patterns; sketches of how people gather and move around a park; measurements of benches and stairs and why people choose to use some and pass others by; close observation of waste receptacles and public rest rooms and storefronts.

When civic groups and public officials hire PPS, they are in part hiring this storehouse of experience. But they are also drawn to it because of Kent himself, and in particular his ardor in insisting that the seemingly

abstruse arts of architecture, engineering, design and planning pay close attention to the untutored citizen and the ways people actually use the spaces around them. "I think Fred is the Mozart of place," says David Burwell, the founder of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and the Surface Transportation Policy Project, and now a senior staff member at PPS. "When he goes into a space, he hears it—it speaks to him in a way it does for very few other people."

Converging Ideas

This is an interesting moment for someone with that sensibility. Over the past few years, a set of tendencies in American urban policy have been converging around the ideas that Kent, Madden and their colleagues have been pushing since the 1970s. The rebellion against sprawl and over-reliance on the automobile; the New Urbanist critique of suburbs and the suburbanization of cities; the debate sparked by Carnegie Mellon economist Richard Florida over the qualities that make cities attractive; the growing tendency within the environmental movement to see urban density as a key to preserving undeveloped spaces; the blunt calculation by public officials that if they can't make their downtowns and neighborhoods appealing, they can't compete for residents or businesses—all of these hinge



The monolithic wall provides nothing for pedestrians to look at, do or buy. It looks like the back of a warehouse, not a public gathering place.

The bus stop is here, but the only entrance to this public library is on the other side of the building. There are no resting places for older users.

This high-capacity, multi-lane road encourages fast driving, but the resulting noise and sense of peril discourage pedestrian traffic.

Don't create blank walls, don't confront pedestrians with the heating and air conditioning infrastructure, don't lard a block with curb cuts.

on the deceptively simple challenge of creating places, especially within cities, that people intuitively like.

So this is a time flush with promise for Kent and PPS. Yet it is also filled with reminders, such as the Time Warner Center, that decades of design habits are so ingrained in American communities that making a place "human," as Kent puts it, is often not even on the agenda. "Everyone recognizes it when something really good happens, like Bryant Park or Campus Martius," says Kathy Madden, "so why aren't we getting more places like that? Why can't we build places we like to go?" The answer, says Kent, is that American communities—and in particular the professionals they turn to for design—have not only forgotten how to do it, they've forgotten they even care about it. His job, as he sees it, is to remind them that they do.

Kent, 62, is tall and disarmingly bear-like. Walking through the streets of Manhattan, he manages somehow to shamble and stride briskly at the same time. One moment he is unhurriedly drawing attention to street minutiae—how a mix of shops and restaurants energizes one block, how a hotel's black-gray façade deadens another—and then all of a sudden he's moving along so fast it's hard to keep up.

He's a bit like that in a public meeting, too, lingering over a slide of people relaxing in Paris's Luxembourg Gardens, then shifting so forcefully to unfamiliar ground that his listeners have to scurry to stay in his wake. "He understands how traditional thinking has created more problems than it has solved," says Mark Simon, special assistant to the CEO of SamTrans in northern California. "So his first task is to attack the traditional thinking. He'll tell you that this ball-park you've got is designed all wrong; then he'll tell you shouldn't have built it in the first place, you should have built a playground. Or he'll tell you that the places where a road is six lanes, it's got to be four lanes. And your first thought is, 'I don't want to be the one to tell the driving public we're reducing it by a lane in each direction.' But if you hang around after your first 'No, no, no!' you get to that place. He's very good at getting you to think anew about fundamental things."

This is in no small part because Kent himself is steeped in those things. After knocking around in graduate school at Columbia in the 1960s, starting a street academy for high-school dropouts and organiz-

ing New York City's first Earth Day in 1970, he went to work for William H. Whyte, the urban sociologist who pioneered the close study of city spaces. Whyte put his findings about why some spaces draw people while others remain lifeless into a classic book, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, which was part manifesto, part social science treatise and part self-help manual for cities.

Kent jumped feet-first into Whyte's world. "He didn't teach so much as set things up for you to discover," Kent recalls. "So he gave me a camera and said, 'Go look at Lexington Avenue between 57th and 59th streets.'" Kent spent days there, hanging around with a detective to watch how pickpockets worked; counting pedestrians; passing an entire day watching a wastebasket, figuring out how its shape made it easy for passers-by to miss as they tried to toss litter in, and noting how people used it as street furniture. Some 35,000 people a day would pass one particular storefront located next to a bank, so Kent went in to talk to the shopkeeper. "I said, 'You must like your location,'" he remembers. "And he said, 'No. People walk faster by a bank, and it takes them two or three storefronts to get back to a window-shopping pace.'"

Positive Clutter

If there was a single lesson Kent took away from the experience, other than that he loved being on a busy street, it was that people intuitively understand the spaces they use, and that how they feel informs what they do. At a level that just nudges perception, they don't like the blank institutional face of a bank, so they speed up as they walk by. And in doing so, they may fail to notice the displays in the shop next door.

Kent, Madden and their colleagues have spent the years since they formed the Project for Public Spaces in 1975 elaborating on this basic notion. They have plenty of suggestions for creating the sort of clutter on a street that people like, for the way buildings

ought to behave—don't create blank walls, don't confront pedestrians with the heating and air conditioning infrastructure, don't lard a block with curb cuts—and for layering attractions that gather people in. "If you have a children's reading room inside and a playground outside," says Kent, "then you put a coffee shop, a Laundromat and a bus stop right there, you will create the busiest spot in your community."

Kent rarely ventures outside without a camera hanging around his neck, and he figures he now has about 750,000 photographs of people using public spaces. Some of them adorn the walls of the PPS office, large framed color photographs of a child holding hands with a bronze statue; a couple kissing on a street; a knot of older men jovially hanging out in front of a barbershop; people on park benches watching passersby.

What they have in common is that the people in them seem relaxed and happy—"You don't see affection in bad places," Kent says; "it's an amazing indicator of the quality of a place." All this is in marked contrast, say, to the picture he likes to show of a group of frustrated elderly women standing on the yellow line in the middle of an intimidatingly huge street in Sydney, Australia, peering at oncoming traffic as they wait to get across. "That's an 800-foot block," Kent remarks, "and of course the traffic engineers weren't thinking that people might like to cross in the middle of it." If you know how to pay attention, in other words, people will tell you by their behavior what they like, what they don't like and what they want.

"Jumble and chaos on the street are great," he insists, "and we're not allowed to have it. We've narrowed the experiences people can have. It's an atrocity, and the design professions don't even know they do it." Even worse, he argues, the people who hire the design professionals often seem powerless to stop them. "I think there are a lot of mayors who are real humanists," Kent says, "but they come up against the disciplines that control a city."

Not surprisingly, sentiments like this have gotten a cool reception among architects and landscape architects, but there is one surprising group of people that is starting to change, thanks in part to PPS's work. For years, Kent reserved his greatest scorn for traffic engineers. "Whatever a traffic engineer tells you to do," he liked to say, "do the opposite and you'll improve your community."

That was until he and PPS began to work with the New Jersey Department of Transportation, and in particular with its director of project development, Gary Toth. As was true in a number of states, NJDOT began in the 1980s and '90s to encounter furious community opposition to its road-building plans. Toth, along with a few of his colleagues, began to realize, as he himself puts it, "that maybe what we were trained to do—that is, jam cars down people's throats—wasn't going to fly." He began casting about for new ways of thinking about road-building, and in the late 1990s his search led him to PPS and Kent.

Place Games

By the time Toth hooked up with them, PPS had developed what it calls "the place game," in which it sends a group of people interested in a particular spot—from shopkeepers to residents to city officials—out to study it. That's what Kent and his colleagues did with Toth's highway engineers. They trooped them out to a major street in New Brunswick, a street that had been widened over the years to the point where it moved traffic well, but was a nightmare for anyone who wasn't in a car. Then they asked the engineers to put themselves in other people's shoes: Imagine being the parent of a child who has to cross the road to get to school; or a shopkeeper trying to make a living from passersby; or a resident for whom the street was essentially a front yard. "I had some trepidation about how the engineers would react," Toth says, drily.

What happened stunned him. The engineers bubbled over with changes they wanted to see: The road needed narrowing, some new crosswalks, slower traffic. "They started looking at it as a place," he says, "and understanding that a street has more than one use: It's not just to get cars through, but people live there." It was the beginning of a cultural change. "What struck me," Toth says, "was how there were a lot of people in this organization who were behaving a certain way not because it was how they should behave, but because they believed that was expected. When we showed the engineers a different way of looking at it—'Hey, we should be thinking about pedestrians and the life of these neighborhoods'—most of them instantly got it. Yet they'd never tried to push for that in 30 years, because the organization didn't expect it."



"We need places that people feel comfortable in and connect to, that they can be affectionate in, smile, laugh, engage, tell stories. It's about bliss, really." —Fred Kent

PPS is about to start working with regional planning agencies and highway engineers in New Hampshire, where the state's commissioner of transportation, Carol Murray, has come to the same conclusions as Toth about how roads can enhance livability and community development. It is heavily involved with San Mateo County because Mike Scanlon, SamTrans' general manager, got tired of what the El Camino Real highway strip has become. "We're sitting in the center of what I believe is one of the most beautiful places on earth," explains Scanlon, "and we've got this butt-ugly road that goes right through it, with hodgepodge development and sleazy types of things—it's a major disconnect, an elephant in the room."

Even when the design profession can be made to see a need for places that build community life, citizens can be slow to catch on. In Bergen County, New Jersey, for instance, the state DOT has enlisted PPS's help in convincing communities that sit along a gridlocked stretch of road called Route 17 that improving land use in the corridor lining the road is a better approach than widening it. So far, the towns are not buying the idea. "The state is making me laugh," says Bergen County Planning Director Farouk Ahmad.

"Because you know and I know and they know that you are not going to put a Band-Aid on it by dealing only with land use. Widening Route 17 has to be their number one alternative." To which Kent responds, "We've become a nation of traffic engineers."

Yet one of the strengths of PPS's approach is that once it can enlist a broad range of people in picturing what they'd like to see, there is a chance to build a constituency that—sometimes with great effort—can withstand pressure to go the more traditional route. In Detroit, for instance, Kent and his colleagues took a core group of citizens through months of conversations about what the two-acre parcel of land that would become Campus Martius park ought to look like.

"We looked at thousands of slides," says Bob Gregory, who runs the organization that was charged with developing the park, "and talked about here's what's pretty, here's what functions well, we do want this, we don't like that. And ultimately we created a vision." They decided the park needed to be beautiful, green, actively used, hold water that people could touch, provide something for people to do every day throughout the year, contain spaces flexible enough to allow entertainment or just quiet sitting—a long list of qualities.

So when everyone from the mayor at the time, Dennis Archer, to major corporate funders of the project started weighing in, Gregory and his group held firm. They resisted the elegant, upscale restaurant that Archer wanted—"fine for Central Park," says Gregory, "but it would have taken up too much square footage"—and the huge pillars, laser lights, and other spectacular ideas that Detroit's corporate community thought would put an iconic stamp on the park. Instead, they wound up with a casual café, a skating rink that has proven an irresistible draw even on the coldest winter days, a fountain that Gregory is certain will be equally popular in the spring, summer and fall, a large lawn, and stages that can become walkways when not in use.

After three decades of trying to improve the built environment bit by bit, Fred Kent is ready to barge off in a more political direction. "At 62, I figure I have five years to change the world," he says. "After that, I'll go into a different mode, maybe comment on buildings or aggressively attack some designer. But I won't give up an inch."

Rob Gurwitt can be reached at robgu@valley.net