Cities are for People: Turning Underused Spaces into Public Places

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It begins with a fundamental premise: Buildings occupy only a fraction of land in cities. Just as important as physical structures, are the public spaces in between.

In many cities these spaces have long been disregarded. Today, however, we are witnessing bold experimentation and innovation coming forth from cities across the globe: cities re-using and re-imagining previously underused spaces in order to uplift communities and transform lives.

The AIA's Cities as a Lab: Designing the Innovation Economy initiative explores the role that cities are playing as the inventive and forward-looking leaders on a range of design and policy choices.

Consider, for example, Medellin, Colombia. For many years Medellin, was viewed as one of the most dangerous cities in the world. City leaders knew Medellin had more to offer than what the rest of the world was being shown...but how could they change the reputation of a place that at one time recorded over 3,000 murders in one year?

Through innovative efforts focused on placemaking and the creation of lively public space, Medellin has demonstrated how a greater understanding of the value of public spaces, and the power unleashed by bringing people together within those places, can turn the most violent blighted cities into thriving vibrant communities.

The City of Medellin began by instituting policy solutions that focused on revitalizing the city's poorest areas. New transit links were brought in to connect the slums on hillsides to the formal jobs below. Because the hills were too steep for bus rapid transit, gondolas and escalators were installed to provide creative mobility solutions for the residents.

The city's former mayor, Sergio Fajardo, championed these and many other programs, some of which used striking architectural design, primarily created by local architecture firms, to create a strong sense of place. Transit terminals, libraries, and sports centers were upgraded and built with forward-looking designs. Mayor Fajardo's agenda, "architecture as social program," captured the overall goal of creating transformative architecture and open spaces for the residents of the city while at the same time driving strong economic growth.

Although all its problems have certainly not been solved, Medellin has experienced a transformation; it recently won the Wall Street Journal/ULI/CITI City of the Year award for most innovative city.

But city-wide transformation is not necessary, as even small scale projects can make a big difference. For example, Katherine Darnstadt, AIA, the founder of Chicago's Latent Design, has worked with Alex Gilliam of Public Workshop to empower 11 teenage girls to improve a vacant lot on Chicago's Far South Side. Through the application of design and science these young women were able to create a peaceful and imaginative play area for neighborhood children. The Femme 2 STEM summer camp was the platform for this transformation to take place, but design thinking was the impetus to make it happen.

Over a two-week period the participants spent time on site collaborating with one another and gathering ideas from passersby to elicit greater community input. They measured, designed, tested, engineered, and built the "Climb, Jump, Leap, Imagine" playground, which included a rope course, decking, and a sandbox.

Community members joined in and spent evenings helping out, providing donations, and even cleaning a nearby vacant lot. The outcome of this project was a community space built by the community for the community. Design was the key connector, but the people — both those who took part in the program and the neighborhood members who got involved — made it happen. The relationships people form with one another and the space around them are what make cities work.

The opportunities and challenges in urban areas are manifest, but political will, far-reaching policy choices, and community engagement can, if allowed, come together in a melting pot of innovation. Only in this way can we create places that are inclusive of all people; that social equity can be a key impetus, and not an afterthought; that architecture can move beyond the building and help to transform the streetscapes and in-between places that can better the lives of people in the community as a whole.

Brooks Rainwater is the American Institute of Architect's Director of Public Policy. Brooks leads the AIA's Public Policy program, focused on design centered policy at the key intersection of cities, sustainability, and health. As a strong advocate for vibrant and successful cities, Brooks frequently speaks and writes on the subject, and is the lead author of Local Leaders, a national research series that examines sustainable, livable, and healthy communities.

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