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## Places

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# Patient Acts of Progress

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For more than a year, GSA's Center for Urban Development has been nurturing a series of quiet experiments in bringing neglected public spaces to life—part of its charge is to make the federal government a full player in local efforts to promote livable communities.

In some cases the center acts as a catalyst, bringing a sense of possibility to places where none was thought to exist. In others it plays a supporting role, providing expertise and resources in places where attention is coalescing. In still others, it challenges the terms of engagement with places, suggesting that the problems being grappled with should be redefined.

Three projects now underway illustrate the productive role the center is playing in helping revitalize local civic spaces.

## Denver: Expanding Horizons

The Federal District in Denver would be a big part of any downtown. It includes two courthouses and two office buildings, with another courthouse on the way. It covers four blocks and is used by some 5,500 workers.

But “we’ve always been kind of an island. There’s been distinct separation between us and the city,” said Paul Prouty, assistant regional administrator of GSA’s Rocky Mountain Region.

The public spaces around the buildings were drab and lifeless, and the district felt neither cohesive nor well connected to the rest of the city, observed Janet Preisser, who manages special projects for GSA in the region.

The Byron Rogers Courthouse, in particular, bunkered down while it hosted the Oklahoma City bombing trial a few years back. So in summer 1999, GSA launched a “First Impressions” project for the courthouse and an attached office building, hoping “to improve the experience of entering a federal building, to make people feel comfortable but secure,” said Tim Horne, Director of GSA’s Colorado Property Management

Center. “We can’t soften security, but we can ease up its presence.”

As the project got under way, Prouty invited the center in for consultation. That process resulted in two key shifts: looking more broadly at the whole neighborhood, and looking more strategically for steps that could be taken quickly.

In November, 1999, the region hosted a community workshop that began mapping out a “federal district master plan,” which consultants Gensler and Civitas are helping prepare. This is no ordinary master plan, participants say. “Instead of the plan leading the process, the building operators are leading it and using the designers as a resource,” explained Fred Kent, president of Project for Public Spaces, which is consulting with the center on the project. “We’ve shifted the balance. They are trying things and seeing how they will fit into a plan. It’s a good way to grow places.”

Last spring, GSA unveiled some small experiments: planting flowers, installing new benches and garbage cans, bringing in vendors, organizing events. “We’re operational people. It’s hard for us to be patient and wait for a plan to develop. We’re trying to generate some movement,” Horne said.

Mid- and long-term plans include improving identification and wayfinding signage throughout the district, installing fountains and public art, narrowing streets and changing paving materials, and trying to influence development adjacent to the district.

The real power of the endeavor may be in the new partnerships that are emerging:

- The regional transit agency planted new trees along the segments of its rail line that pass through the Federal District.
- The Denver-based Harmsen Foundation is loaning some of its art holdings for an exhibition in the Byron White Courthouse.
- The Denver Botanical Garden has proposed a series of beautification, education and event opportunities throughout the Federal District,



Left: Preliminary concept plan for Hyde Park

Above: Minor improvements to Federal Plaza last summer included a food vendor. A redesign and reconstruction of the space is in the works. Courtesy City of Fort Worth

**The Fort Worth  
Downtown Public Square**

- 1. A park-like setting for lunchtime use, with food and information kiosks.
- 2. A public plaza with trees at the edges and a stage. It would be large enough and open enough to host events, such as performances or a market.
- 3. A quiet garden-like space with a gazebo and cafe.
- 4. A major focal space with a large sculpture.
- 5. An entrance plaza for city hall, accentuated with fountains and a cafe.
- 6. A formal garden.
- A. Bus stops would be located a short walk from each other, facilitating transfers and generating pedestrian activity.
- B. Narrower streets would slow traffic and facilitate pedestrian crossings.
- C. Pedestrian crossings could be established at strategic points.

Graphic: City of Fort Worth, Project for Public Spaces

including planting gardens, providing material for planters, and replanting bluegrass areas with native grasses.

- The University of Colorado at Denver architecture school is organizing two studios that will consider the future of the Federal District and the transitional area adjacent to it.

**Fort Worth: Providing Critical Backing**

In summer, 1999, Fort Worth planners asked consultants for advice on how to configure a bus transfer station near its government center. Little did they expect the project would metamorphose into an endeavor that few cities have had the ambition to consider lately: building a new civic square.

The idea was hatched last year when Kent suggested the city should facilitate bus transfers by dispersing stops for various routes within a concentrated area, rather than directing them to a centralized facility—the better to create dynamic pedestrian activity. One location he proposed was a confluence of streets near city hall and several other local and federal office buildings. That precipitated the idea that the streets and six under-used spaces in the area might be reorganized into a civic square.

Though the project was initiated and is being led by the city’s planning department, gsa’s support so far—has been critical to the project’s survival in a number of ways:

- The center is providing consulting services through Project for Public Spaces. pps staff attend planning and design meetings, and helped draft concept and phasing plans for the civic square.

• gsa hopes to help fund a study that will show the economic and social returns created by money spent for improvement to civic squares. “If we can argue how projects like this have paid for themselves through economic and social benefits, the city council will be much more inclined to finance part of this,” said Fernando Costa, Fort Worth’s planning director.

• gsa’s Greater Southwest Region office is gearing up to redesign and reconstruct the plaza that adjoins the federal building as part of its First Impressions program—the first major section of Hyde Park that would be redone. gsa is executing a license agreement with the city, which will allow it to commission a design and pay for improvements.

gsa says the project supports its long-term business interests. “If we can have quality places for eating or shopping or recreation, it helps us in terms of customer satisfaction and in recruiting and retaining employees,” said Harold Hebert, a regional gsa asset manager. “We have vacant space in this building, and the improvements we’re talking about are going to make it easier for us to find tenants.”

Most importantly, perhaps, gsa’s commitment to the project has provided an important political

boost. “The more we were able to say GSA was using Fort Worth as a model, the more people started listening,” city planner Mike Brennan said.

### Washington, D.C.: Finding Lost Space

At times the plaza at the Department of Education (DOE) headquarters in Washington, D.C., seems like an orphan of L’Enfant’s plan for the city. The triangular space is within view of the immensely popular Air and Space Museum but separated from it, and the rest of the Mall, by two major streets.

Last summer, as GSA and DOE celebrated the completion of renovations to DOE’s building, they realized the plaza was an important bit of unfinished business. Regional staff linked up with the center, which is coordinating discussions between DOE, other agencies, cultural institutions and property owners in the area.

Like in Denver and Fort Worth, GSA hopes to bring a broad range of players, such as the Air and Space Museum and the National Park Service, into the fold. Like in Denver, GSA hopes to jumpstart the revitalization of the plaza with incremental changes that could be made as early as this spring and summer.

“The first meetings are to get people to realize there is the possibility of doing something together,” said Kent. “People look at this space and have zero in mind. They see nothing but a void until you start showing them the possibilities; then the light bulb turns on.”

While the initial focus will be on connecting the DOE plaza better with the museums, GSA hopes that talks will eventually include other plazas and parks along Maryland Avenue. Most people don’t know, Kent pointed out, that that is the most direct route between the museum area and a Metrorail station.

The strategy of considering new uses for the space, and pursuing quickly implementable ideas, has caught attention, according to Tony Costa, assistant regional administrator for GSA’s National Capital Region. “In the past people probably looked at the plaza from a design perspective, rather than a use perspective. That probably meant a fair amount of money to fix it, and people might not have wanted to go down that road.

If we talk about programming, there is hope that they will see an opportunity.”

### Cultivating Whole Places

In one sense, the center’s projects in Denver, Fort Worth and Washington are simple acts of constituency building—forging relationships that address the challenges of making good places. Then, ongoing management strategies are put in



Preliminary draft of Denver’s Federal District Master Plan. Graphic: Civitas

place, and on that foundation, longer-term design interventions can be made.

In another sense, the projects are about the wonder of discovering what balance of management, design and programming will work best in each particular place. They are experiments built from the ground up, and are establishing a hopeful foundation for further accomplishments.

Together, these projects demonstrate the broadening of the federal commitment to excellence in public service design. The emphasis is not on architecture, preservation or public art per se, but on the whole being of places, the ways people use and experience them, and the ways they are related to the larger city.

“This is a chance for our people to be more proud of our buildings. And, to some extent, I hope it can make the public at large feel better about government,” Prouty said.