

The neighborhood is the basic unit of human civilization. Unlike cities, counties, wards, townships, enterprise zones, and other artificial entities, the neighborhood is easily recognizable as a real place. It's the spot on earth we call home. It's where our lives unfold day after day — meeting friends at the coffee shop, chatting with neighbors on the street, going about our business in stores, parks, gathering spots, and our own backyard. Some people may be indifferent to events in their city, or even the nation, but fiercely engaged in their neighborhood because what happens there affects them in direct, personal ways.

Neighborhoods — whether in cities, suburbs, or small towns — are the level of social organization at which people interact most regularly and naturally, providing a ready-made forum for tackling problems that arise in a community. Even in places where there are no pressing troubles, the neighborhood remains the ideal setting for getting important things done, like restoring a park, enlivening a business district, or boosting the sense of community.

At their best, neighborhoods function as villages, in which residents' lives overlap in positive ways. We look out for one another and share a public life in common. Everyone who wants to change the world, or simply make improvements in their own lives, is well advised to sit down with the neighbors

and work together to make their dreams come true. You'll be surprised what can be accomplished if you are willing to think big about your little place in the world.

PPS was founded in 1975 with the mission of helping people bring new life to their neighborhoods. Drawing on the ideas of civic visionaries like William H. Whyte and Jane Jacobs, we at PPS are committed to helping communities find the tools they need to improve their business districts, parks, streets, squares, community centers and other public places. Over the past 32 years, working in more than 2,000 communities in 26 countries, we have continually witnessed the amazing power of everyday citizens to change their world.

Many cities and towns around the world have recently experienced remarkable turnarounds due in large part to "local heroes" who have introduced new ideas and brought new energy to their communities. Sometimes they are fixing a problem on a certain street corner, at other times masterminding the revival of an entire downtown; but in every case these citizen-led efforts set the stage for more improvements to come.

When it comes to revitalizing communities, the importance of the average citizen cannot be overestimated. That's the reason we created *The Great Neighborhood Book* — to highlight the success stories of

Introduction

Changing the world
one place at
a time

everyday people that can inspire you to do similar things in your own communities. Some folks start with a simple idea, like putting a bench in front of their house for neighbors who want to rest and socialize (see page 11). Others directly address fear in their communities, like Jutta Mason in Toronto, who pulled together a group of neighbors, including teenagers thought of as the local “toughs,” to bring life back to a local park (see page 127). Still others act as catalysts for the rebirth of a district, like Dana Crawford, who saved a block of historic buildings in Denver’s Larimer Square and created a new heart in the city (see page 169).

What these citizens have in common is that they are, in the best sense of the phrase, “zealous nuts” — meaning they are dedicated to making their communities better places. They usually have a strong intuitive sense of what makes neighborhoods safe, lively, prosperous, and interesting. They know more about their communities than any designers or other self-proclaimed experts because they live and work there, which gives them insight on what needs to be done and the best ways to make it happen. Zealous nuts make sure the places we live are loved and well cared for. No lasting progress in any town or city ever happens without the involvement of these “local heroes.” It’s as simple as that.

Talk with any zealous nut and you will find them open and

more than happy to share the secrets of their success, which often follows a pattern like this:

First, they become aware of a problem, which they see diminishing the quality of life in their neighborhood.

Then they recognize that they can’t wait for the authorities in government or other institutions to do anything about it because their neighborhood’s concerns will likely be perceived as too small or parochial, too controversial, not in keeping with the normal ways of doing business, or not fitting neatly into the responsibilities of any one department.

Next, they shape a general vision for what needs to be done, whether it is slowing traffic so their children can cross the street, saving old buildings to maintain the character of their community, or getting to know their neighbors. Sometimes they discover that they can make change happen very quickly by acting on their own.

In some cases, they launch a public campaign, making alliances with others who are experiencing the same problem and finding a way to communicate their ideas to the entire community.

In working with neighborhoods of all types throughout the world — big city and small town; prosperous and poor; recently built and centuries old — we’ve noticed one thing that usually sets a great neighborhood apart from a mediocre one

— there are a wealth of good places in great neighborhoods where people can relax, have fun, and meet up with one another. Here are four basic characteristics that make a good place:

Good places promote sociability. These are the spots where you run into people you know. They are the places you take friends and family when you want to show them the neighborhood. They become the center of the action by offering people many different reasons to go there.

Good places offer lots of things to do. The places we love most are the ones where we can pursue a variety of activities. Without opportunities to do something more than sit and look, the experience you have in that place is “thin” — there is nothing to keep you there for any length of time.

Good places are comfortable and attractive. They beckon you to walk through and maybe stay a while. Flowers, comfortable benches with nice views, and attractive lighting all make you feel this is the place you want to be. In contrast, a place that lacks these types of amenities often feels unwelcoming or has a bad image. It may be unsafe or just feel unsafe, but either way, you don't want to stay there.

Good places are accessible. These places are clearly identifiable from a distance, easy to enter when you get closer, and simple to use. A space that is

not accessible will end up empty, forlorn, and often neglected or dilapidated.

Throughout years of work all over the world, we have learned key lessons about what makes a place thrive — a process that we have come to call “Placemaking.”

Here are the 11 principles of Placemaking:

- 1. The community is the expert.** The people living and working in a place are the folks who know what needs to be done and how best to do it.
- 2. You are creating a place, not a design.** The blueprints for a neighborhood improvement effort are much less critical to its success than other factors, such as a management plan and the involvement of local citizens.
- 3. You can't do it alone.** Finding the right partners will bring more resources, innovative ideas, and new sources of energy for your efforts.
- 4. They'll always say “It can't be done.”** When government officials, business people, and even some of your own neighbors say it won't work, what they really mean is “We've never done it like this before.” It's a sign you're on the right track.
- 5. You can see a lot by just observing.** The smartest way to turn a neighborhood around is to first take a close look at what goes on there,

watching out for what works and what doesn't in that particular place.

- 6. Develop a vision.** For a community vision to make sense and to make a difference, it needs to come from the people who live there, not from consultants or other outside professionals.
- 7. Form supports function.** If you don't take into account how people use a particular place in the beginning, you will have to deal with the consequences later.
- 8. Make the connections.** A great place in a neighborhood offers many things to do, all of which enhance each other and add up to more than the sum of the parts.
- 9. Start with petunias.** Little things can set the stage for big changes, especially by proving to local skeptics that change is indeed possible.
- 10. Money is not the issue.** If you have a spirited community working with you, you'll find creative ways around financial obstacles.
- 11. You are never finished.** Eighty percent of the success of any good place is due to how well it is managed after the project is done.

How many good places does your neighborhood need? In all of our work, PPS asks people to identify the most important places in their region, in their city or town, and in their neighborhoods.

We then ask them to think about the number of things there are to do in each of these places. Cumulatively, the quality of life in any locale will grow exponentially if each place within it is good and offers at least ten interesting and distinct things to do there. We have come to call this idea the Power of Ten, based on Charles Eames' concept and our discussions with Mimi Gates of the Seattle Art Museum, for the universal way it applies to every neighborhood or community.

Think about your own region for a minute and write down the ten most important places that are nearby — these are the spots you frequently go or recommend to others. These places could be an especially charming village, a major park, a historic district, etc. Now think about your city or town and identify the ten most important places there. It could be your main street, the riverfront, an interesting shop, a library, museum, post office, etc. Zoom in and think about one of these places and try to write down the smaller places that make up that place. For example, if you named the main street as an important place, what are the little places on that street where you enjoy spending time? You can shop there, of course, but if your main street is truly a good place, you can also sit outside on a bench and talk to your neighbors, get a cup of coffee nearby, and enjoy the passing scene.

There are literally thousands of possibilities you can draw on in your efforts to create good places in your neighborhood. Here is a small sampling of improvements that can make a big impact, based on ideas detailed in this book:

Create a strong sense of community by putting a bench out in front of your house where people can stop to sit and chat with each other.

Tame traffic in neighborhoods by making streets so interesting that people naturally slow down to see what is going on.

Develop new activities for teens that make them want to get involved in the future of their neighborhood instead of feeling excluded and alienated from the community.

Introduce new kinds of park activities, such as gardens catering to certain groups — for example, children, seniors, or various ethnic groups — or a bread oven that is used to cook community dinners.

Improve safety and security in a neighborhood by encouraging people to do things like saying hello to everyone they see. This can change the spirit of a community faster and more effectively than a police presence will ever do.

Bring new kinds of people downtown with creative campaigns that deliver social and economic benefits for these critical core neighborhoods.

Promote new opportunities for social interaction and

community pride by introducing activities from different cultures, such as bocce ball courts, casitas, or an evening promenade.

Make kids healthier by developing innovative programs so they can safely walk or bike to school once again.

Establish more effective community-based planning processes that result in less arguing, more public input, and a general level of agreement on what to do to make the community better.

Foster new types of businesses that not only make money but also have more far-reaching impacts — for example, rent fun and unique bikes to people who don't ordinarily ride bikes, like seniors, disabled people, and young children.

Champion your local hang-out by making it a “Third Place.” Every vital neighborhood needs what sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls a “Third Place” — a coffee shop, café or other spot where everyone feels welcome and can strike up a conversation with their neighbors. Starbucks, whose mission was inspired by Oldenburg, built its business this way. Its phenomenal growth has helped spark a boom in locally owned coffee shops all over the world.

Provide clean public restrooms through enterprising programs that grow out of partnerships between businesses and the downtown association. The big question is, of course, how do you begin to create the

good places that every neighborhood craves? What process can you use to build places where people want to hang out? Long experience has shown us that bottom-up strategies work better than top-down approaches. The bottom-up strategy recognizes citizens as the experts, is guided by the wisdom of the community, and builds a strong partnership between the public and private sectors.

This is the most important thing we've learned in the more than 30 years we've been working to make great neighborhoods.

We are inspired over and over by the commitment, vision, and warmth of the zealous nuts we meet. They truly are local heroes, and we tell many of their stories in this book. But there are thousands more stories that we couldn't fit in. Each neighborhood is different, yet local heroes all share the passion, patience, and love necessary to make their communities better. We applaud them all, and everyone else who is making the world a little better by improving their small piece of it.

We want to hear your neighborhood stories

Tell us what worked to improve your own community. Post your stories and photos on the Great Neighborhoods discussion forum at www.pps.org:

or send to:

Neighborhood Success Stories,
c/o PPS, 700 Broadway,
4th Floor, New York, NY 10003.

Be sure to include contact information so we can reach you and anyone else involved with the project. We are compiling success stories for future projects and books. For more information see www.pps.org.