



CHUSID SYMPOSIUM ON PLACE

CHRISTOPHERSON CENTER FOR COMMUNITY PLANNING

About Place

Chusid Symposium on Place 2025

Remarks by Jeffrey Chusid

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When I was asked to suggest a program at the Christopherson Center that would bear my name, I proposed the event we are at today: a series of conversations on how meaningful places happen. I was especially interested in providing an opportunity for the different parties who play important roles in the process to meet and share experiences and insights; and for academics and others interested in their stories to be able to learn as well.

But honestly, exploring place has always been a way for me to satisfy my curiosity about the world. Understanding places, how they are defined, bounded, made meaningful, is about learning to see, about hearing stories, about being open to the values and cultures of the communities and landscapes where we work and play. Visiting the sites being celebrated today was therefore a voyage of discovery for me, and one I hope all of you here today will have a chance to do in person as well.

It is also interesting to reflect on how important these places are in a world that is increasingly focused on digital media, where it seems that more people meet on line than in person; and where simulacra of places seem more exciting than the real thing: the Venetian or Luxor or New York New York in Las Vegas, Main Street in Disneyland, and any number of worlds accessed through gaming consoles. Still, I think we realize that those kinds of experiences are created for us, not by us; that places that require effort, collaboration, listening, seeing, thinking, empathy become valuable and meaningful because of all that work we invested in making them. And that great places still have the capacity to surprise us, to transport us, to take us outside ourselves, and to enrich and enliven the activities that take place within them.

An original idea becomes a successful place because of decisions made along the way as well as because of a site's inherent properties. The 19th century architect and urbanist Burnham said, "make no single purpose plans." And the sites we are recognizing today indeed have become places where multiple audiences, agendas, programs, and experiences happen.



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The sociologist Thomas Gieryn even suggests we think about Place as a verb, that equality or inequality, difference or similarity, power, politics, interaction, community, social movements, science, identity, memory, history are ‘emplaced’ in space. There is always a physical context to these phenomena and concerns, and they shape places in the same way that places shape those phenomena and concerns, and us. Gieryn continues: “Places are worked by people” in that they are created, used, managed, altered, destroyed, and/or challenged. “Social processes happen through the material forms.” “Place is not merely a setting or backdrop, but a ... player in the game—a force with detectable and independent effects on social life.”

The Gere Block is an example of a project whose developers intuitively understand that back and forth, making co-working spaces, galleries and other activities into a mutually supportive community, housed in a historic industrial structure, resulting in a place that serves as a home to an amazing range of diverse and interesting organizations and individuals, helping its community, and more broadly, the city of Syracuse to thrive.

Describing any particular place is a fascinating exercise, because place is a function of geography, scale, history, materiality and context. Also of intention, use, audience, and resources.

So how is a place defined and bounded? A place is sited somewhere. But that somewhere can often have a certain ambiguity, even as we set limits for legal or other practical reasons. Part of the ambiguity is a natural result of the general character of the word place. Think of a similar example: the word region, as defined by three design professions: to an urban planner, region is an economic concept: a city and its linked suburbs, transportation and infrastructure networks and patterns; its industrial, residential and commercial districts. To an architect, it is a cultural and historical concept: an area in which the development patterns and architectural styles share similar forms, materials and antecedents. To a landscape architect, region is an ecological concept: an area linked by geological features and communities of flora and fauna. Depending on the purpose and uses of a place, we find similar overlays of reading and meaning.

To return to what constitutes a boundary...Waverly Glen Park, for instance, is centered around a waterfall, but includes walking trails that connect to a system of trails that extends far beyond the park’s borders, as well as linking it to a nearby golf course and to the town.



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It also has a performance venue, which makes it part of an infrastructure of such spaces in our region where musicians perform and we can enjoy them live, including, for example, the amphitheater on the Onondaga Creekwalk. Thinking in multiple scales, multiple uses and multiple audiences can change what we think of as the limits of a place. And extend its impacts.

How about the physical resources that constitute a place? And the cultural resources that reflect its history and community and meaning? Because so many successful places are made through addition, through layering new and refreshing old, the term placemaking has been recently been replaced, or at least supplemented, with the term placekeeping—to acknowledge the people and stories and things that were there before we decided to ‘create’ a place. It also gives stewardship as important a role in place as design. At Opendore, the reconstruction of a historic home has not only yielded a house museum and archive, but reinvigorated the Sherwood Equal Rights Historic District, and helped us see and appreciate the other structures nearby. A place that celebrates the past can now educate the future, and also just be a cool place to hang out in the present.

Even as we credit people who invest a great deal of time and effort to creating a wonderful place, it is worth noting that many successful places do not happen as a result of a conscious decision to make a ‘great place,’ but rather because there was a desire to address a social, educational and/or economic agenda, working thoughtfully and creatively with people and resources. But the honesty and authenticity of their actions, along with an innate appreciation of where they were working, resulted in a great place. Community Arts of Elmira has made much of the city a canvas for vibrant and intriguing murals, through their Elmira Infinite Canvas project, but as important as that has been to placekeeping in Elmira, it is almost secondary to how the organization uses art education and production as a social and economic development tool. The murals are works that enhance spaces around the city, sure, but they are also manifestations of a holistic effort across multiple fronts to improve the lives, as well as the environments, of the residents of Elmira.

The people who are expected to use or benefit from a particular place are important to the creation of a successful project. Ideally, they are also part of the creation process. A corollary to Burnham’s advice quoted earlier might be “target no single audience.”



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A stroll along the Onondaga Creekwalk not only satisfies the yen of folks craving some time in the outdoors, but allows for a varied set of experiences and provides information on wide-ranging topics such as rain gardens, social justice, and the history of salt mining. But most importantly, the Creekwalk connects neighborhoods and communities, as well as city to parkland to lake, expanding our understanding of who lives in Syracuse and who is worth being served.

Whether it is set in and celebrates a special natural landscape, or engages with street, structure and history in a town or city, places respond to their context and shape them in turn—and in the best cases enhance and revitalize that context. The Dove Block is a historic 19th century commercial structure set on an important intersection in the heart of downtown Geneva. That location meant that anything proposed for this site would have an out-sized impact on the town. Then there was the historical context of a long occupancy by the artist Arthur Dove, which suggested a direction for programming for a new institution. With galleries, studio and event spaces, and a theater all filled with non-stop free programs for children and adults, the Dove Block not only serves as a wonderful, active place for and about creativity, but has helped catalyze development throughout downtown.

Finally, a word about the design of new things in existing places. Stewart Park and Clute Park, are important places in which their communities, Ithaca and Watkins Glen respectively, can access the lakes which are the fundamental reason for the towns' existence. Both parks have recently completed work on pavilions and other facilities that enhance places that are already meaningful. With all new construction, Clute Park added an event space, splash and ice-skating rink, and support facilities in a way that helps to frame the park and the lake, and increases opportunities for an already important place to expand programming and audiences. Stewart Park just received a preservation award from Historic Ithaca for the sensitive addition to one of its historic pavilions, and has also restored its classic carousel besides adding a splash pad, and increasing accessibility to facilities throughout the park. Innovation together with stewardship keeps these places meaningful and alive.

The sites being recognized today were selected by an advisory committee that was tasked with finding places that thoughtfully and beautifully addressed issues of equity and community, resiliency, conservation and preservation, and economic and social development.



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These are considerations important to the mission of the Susan Christopherson Community Planning Center, which was founded three years ago to assist communities in New York address these concerns. I know that Susan would also have been thrilled with the range and quality of the projects being celebrated here today. Still there many ways to define and identify memorable places around New York. I encourage you to join us next year as we shift our geographic focus to another region of the state, and continue this conversation.

And I would like to end by recognizing and thanking the people who make our world better, one place at a time.