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[PPS.org Home](#) > [Making Places Newsletter](#) > [December 2005](#) >

Top 12 Public Squares in the U.S. and Canada

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MAKING PLACES *December 2005*



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In This Issue

Top 12 Public Squares in the U.S. and Canada

Shining examples to inspire the growing movement to bring back town squares.

1. [Jackson Square, New Orleans, LA](#)



This remarkable square at the center of New Orleans' French Quarter is beautifully laid out, with historic buildings on three sides facing out on a lush park full of trees, flowers and pathways. Outside the park, set apart by an elegant fence, a bustling pedestrian thoroughfare swings with the activity of musicians, artists, vendors, and street performers. The approach

from neighboring streets is equally impressive, exemplifying the principle that we at PPS frequently describe as "reaching out like an octopus." As you get closer and closer, catching tantalizing views of the square, the street level experience becomes more interesting and the expectation of what lies ahead grabs you with a real force.

Jackson Square is one of many "sacred places" in an extraordinary city. Those sacred places should be the anchors of New Orleans' rebirth. If each neighborhood can renew itself around a central public place like Jackson Square, the city may emerge from the catastrophe of Katrina stronger than it was before.

2. [Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY](#)



An extraordinary public space within one of the world's most prominent office building complexes, Rockefeller Plaza is a study in transformation. Thirty-five years ago, this complex was insular and almost privatized. It had a skating rink, but most of the retail was just services for the tenants. The Channel Gardens were planted mainly with dreary yew bushes.

Around that time PPS was asked what kind of spikes would be appropriate to keep people off of the yews. Instead, we suggested politely, "Try benches." This was a revelation to the Center's management--a turning point where they began to see the potential of inviting people into the Plaza,

Launching a New Tradition of Great Public Squares

With historical roots in cultures all over the world, squares are being rediscovered as a powerful means of transforming communities.

Magic in the Motor City

A new public square, Campus Martius, brings life back downtown.

Top 12 Public Squares in the U.S. and Canada

Shining examples to inspire the growing movement to bring back town squares.

The World's Best Squares

From Mexico to Italy to Iran, these remarkable squares can inspire us all.

The 16 Squares Most Dramatically in Need of Improvement

These squares could be transformed from embarrassments to great community places.

Ten Principles for Creating Successful Squares

Small details add up to great places.

PPS Goes to College

Our new program to bring the power of Placemaking to university campuses starts at Harvard, Stanford, and Duke.

A Holiday Movie that Celebrates Public Spaces

Popular culture exerts a powerful influence on how we feel about the places we live.

How a Failing Suburban Mall Became a Beloved Indoor Town Square

Third Place Commons is the heart of Lake Forest Park, Washington.



The closest thing to a European neighborhood square you'll find this side of the Atlantic, Square St. Louis is nestled in Montreal's Latin Quarter near the university and the fashionably bohemian Plateau neighborhood. Indeed, singer and poet Leonard Cohen is rumored to own one of the picturesque townhouses that line either side of the long

rectangular park.

A classic Victorian fountain is the centerpiece of the park, along with an old gazebo with a small selection of snacks. It is said to be favorite haunt of writers, painters and filmmakers seeking artistic inspiration, but on a sunny day everyone in the neighborhood seems to be there, making it a true town square. The major attraction are plentiful benches, where you can relax, meet your neighbors or just watch as the world passes by.

11. Squares of Savannah, GA

(Submitted by Thomas Erwin to PPS's *Great Public Spaces* website)



Lafayette Square

The squares are set out within a unique grid of streets and "lanes" (or alleys) that follows an inspired pattern established by General James Oglethorpe when he founded Savannah in 1733. All of the squares are about 200 feet from north to south, but they vary east to west from a maximum of over 300 feet to a minimum of little more than 100 feet. The largest squares are about three times the size of the smallest.

Magnificent live oak canopies, wide brick sidewalks, inviting benches, refreshing fountains, intriguing monuments and public art, and the feeling of being in beautiful outdoor rooms produce an almost palpable sense of ease and pleasure in most of Savannah's squares and parks, young and old, black and white, tourist and Savannahian alike.

12. Washington Square Park, New York, NY



Washington Square Park is one of the best known and best-loved destinations in New York City. And as a neighborhood park and civic gathering place, it is among the world's greatest public spaces. Washington Square Park has a unique and very special "vibe" that is tied closely to its spontaneous music scene and longstanding use as a performance and protest space.

This is arguably the park's most important attribute. Residents, performers, and regular visitors care deeply about this park because of its history, spontaneity, and role as a gathering space and magnet for activity.

PPS was recently retained by a local organization to study the park and make recommendations on a proposed redesign. What we discovered through our observations, surveys and workshop results was that nearly all of the key attributes of a great public space are present in Washington Square Park. First identified in the research of William Whyte's Street Life Project (and later refined and expanded upon through PPS's work), these attributes are:

- People engaged in a wide range of activities and uses;
- Diversity of ages and balance of genders;
- People present in groups as well as alone;
- Most parts of the park are used (there are few empty or unused areas);
- Well-used at all different times of day and week, even during poor weather conditions.

Its success can also be measured by other indicators, such as public displays of affection, comfort and safety, stewardship, and the way people share the space to engage in different activities packed tightly together.

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