

LISC

Twin Cities

*Helping people
and places prosper*

COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATIONS



Room to mingle The importance of public spaces to community development

Next time you enjoy a barbeque in the park, take your children to a playground, sit at a library computer, or peddle down a bike path—you're participating in the long-held tradition of the commons. A concept that started centuries ago with people sharing land for grazing and hunting, the commons refers to public resources that can be used by anyone.

Community gathering places, an important form of the commons, have influenced how American society and democracy have evolved. Strong, civic minded communities need public spaces where residents can gather—to enjoy an experience, share opinions, learn, celebrate, commune with nature, and get to know each other.

Think of what a different place the Twin Cities would be without its much-touted park system, libraries, community gardens, bike and walking paths, theatres, galleries, and museums. These public spaces help define the character and quality of life of our region, and unite its far-flung, varied communities.

Today, as community developers help revitalize neighborhoods not just through real estate development projects, but through a broader spectrum of activities called "placemaking"—community gathering spaces are a crucial part of the mix. Formal and informal places for people to congregate are invaluable community assets we can't afford to ignore.

More than fun

Benefits from public spaces go beyond just relaxation and enjoyment. They are sought after amenities that can attract new residents and businesses to a community, and raise property values. They can improve physical and mental health—who hasn't experienced the calming effect of a walk in a park after a chaotic day? They can help inform and educate us. They can also help control crime and protect the environment.

"We can't take public places for granted," says Andriana Abariotes, executive director of Twin Cities LISC, a local branch of the nation's largest community development support organization. "And we can't stop creating them, especially in areas where they're in short supply. That includes lower income neighborhoods."

Public spaces can tell the story of the community. That's why it's important for local residents to help drive the community development agenda. The Twin Cities has dozens of examples of these emerging public places—each influenced by its surrounding neighborhoods.

Reinvented theaters

In recent years, a lot of attention has been given to the resurrection of old theaters into lively community arts centers. In the Twin Cities, community developers and resident activists have rescued two beautiful, early 20th-century gems. The legendary [Capri Theater](#) on West Broadway in Minneapolis' North Side was renovated into a gathering, education, and performance space that hosts events ranging from Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra concerts to hip-hop performances to an acclaimed Legends jazz series. Owned and operated by [Plymouth Christian Youth Center](#), the Capri also hosts community forums, and offers a wonderful after-school theater arts program.



Victoria Theater, photo by Kimmy Tanaka, courtesy of [Historical St. Paul](#)

Right now, in St. Paul's Frogtown neighborhood, the decrepit but regal [Victoria Theater](#) is experiencing the same kind of community-driven rebirth. Thanks to [the Frogtown Neighborhood Association](#), the Twin Cities Community Land Bank, and the Victoria Theater Arts Initiative, the historic landmark will become a community-owned arts center. "The Victoria Theater isn't just going to be a place to come and see a show," says Caty Royce, executive director of the Frogtown Neighborhood Association. "It's going to be a place where everyone feels welcome to come and interact and be a part of Saint Paul's most diverse community, and be surprised by what they find."

Parks, gardens, plazas, and playgrounds

A great illustration of how parks can help revive an area is Hopkin's Cottageville Park, located in one of the Twin Cities most diverse suburban corridors. A [broad community coalition](#) along the Blake Road Corridor has brought an unsafe park back to life by adding pathway lighting, enlarging and improving playing fields, installing picnic tables, and establishing a large community garden. The City of Hopkins also is in the process of significantly enlarging the size of the park.



Lyndale Gardens rendering, courtesy of [The Cornerstone Group](#)

Ensuring ample places for public gatherings was one of the guiding principles of Richfield's redesign of the old [Lyndale Gardens](#) site. Once completed, the site will include not only housing units, but a large public plaza, walking and biking paths, a stage area, picnic areas, an urban farm, and a community oven. "By spring 2015, we're hoping the site will be a great venue for hosting community events and classes that highlight the stage and farm areas," says Beth Pfiefer, director of development at The Cornerstone Group, the site's developers.

Perhaps even more ambitious is St. Paul's [Frogtown Farm](#). Neighborhood leaders working with the Trust for Public Land, the City of St. Paul, and the Wilder Foundation, have acquired a 12.7 acre parcel of land that is being developed as a public park and farm in an area that has the least amount of green space per child in St. Paul. Residents will not only be able to enjoy a major recreation area, but also benefit from a new nature sanctuary and demonstration farm.

Libraries

The renovation of the historic [Franklin Library](#), instrumental in revitalizing Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis, showed how you can preserve an important building while making it relevant to today's neighborhood Residents—many of whom are Native Americans and recent immigrants. A hive of activity, especially after school when students gather to study there, the library houses the largest collection of American Indian literature in the region. Many libraries, like this one, also provide free meeting rooms for community gatherings.

In St. Paul, the creation of the [Rondo Community Outreach Library](#) as the ground floor of an affordable housing development has proven a stroke of genius. The library is not only a popular technology and learning hub for many immigrants living in the area, but for families who want to support the educational achievement of their children. It also offers a resource center to support entrepreneurs in the Rondo-Frogtown area who want to establish and grow their businesses.

Community meeting spaces

The recently opened [East Side Enterprise Center](#), a support hub for entrepreneurs and small business owners on the East Side of St. Paul, has earmarked several large, beautiful spaces for community use. Prior to this, free public meeting space was hard to come by in the neighborhood. Development of the center was spearheaded by Dayton's Bluff Community Council and the Latino Economic Development Center.

The six affordable apartment buildings that make up St. Paul's [Rolling Hills](#) are home to many refugees. When the complex underwent renovation recently, owners including [Lutheran Social Services](#) made certain that structural changes contributed to a better quality of life for residents. That meant adding not only a convenient on-site health clinic, but community rooms and a community garden.



A new community meeting room at Rolling Hills

Galleries

One of the most innovative public spaces created over the past few years is [All My Relations Gallery](#) on Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis, an area that boasts one of the largest urban American Indian populations in the country. The development of the gallery was led by the [Native American Community Development Institute](#), but grew out of a neighborhood improvement and cultural corridor plan that came directly from members of the community. Today, it's a beautiful space where people from all over the Twin Cities can view the latest work of contemporary American Indian artists. The gallery also sponsors classes and events that bring arts to youth and elders through the creation of murals, art cars, tours, artists talks, and a Community/Youth Art gallery in the adjacent coffee shop.

On Minneapolis' North Side, [Juxtaposition Arts](#) runs a multifaceted training center where neighborhood youth can learn art skills they can turn into careers, as well as exhibit and sell their creative products. Juxta's recently expanded gallery space--and its entire campus--welcome local residents and visitors in to share the youths' creative development, and to celebrate special events like the North Side Art Crawl.

"These are the kinds of community-driven efforts to develop public spaces in lower income areas that we need to support," says Abariotes. "The difference that a community garden, a children's playground, a renovated library, or a new bike path can make in a struggling neighborhood can't be overstated. They give people pride in their community, and a sense of ownership, belonging, and long-term stewardship. They're a crucial part of a good quality of life." 