A Playful Plaza: Bringing Imagination and New Life to Downtown Providence

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Every Thursday in the summer, at about 9am, the Downtown Providence Park Conservancy (DPPC) crew gathers and prepares for the long day ahead—nine non-stop hours of family programming in Burnside Park.

On one edge of the park, The O’Crepe food truck is already open for business as Jennifer Smith and her team of interns and volunteers unlock the doors of the Imagination Center and start moving colorful equipment out into the park. Folding tables, stools, and art supplies head to one area for Art in the Park; as jumbo beanbags, colorful benches, and a sound system head to another for Storytime. Book carts filled with the work of local authors and illustrators roll out onto the Imagination Center deck to create an outdoor reading room.

By 11am this small urban park has been transformed into a crowded and bustling place—families with children watch a local storyteller perform, while other kids build Lego towers or climb onto the park’s boat sculpture. As artists Phillipe Jejeune and Ricky Katowicz are busy setting up for Art in the Park, passersby simply take in the scene as they wait for the lunchtime food trucks to roll up.
Greater Kennedy Plaza

A few years ago Burnside Park was facing problems similar to many downtown parks—the space was dominated by a small number of unemployed adults, and there was little reason for other residents or visitors to want to spend time there. The park was well maintained, but locals mostly walked through it on their way somewhere else. There wasn’t much incentive to stay.

In 2008, local civic leaders decided to take a closer look at a group of public spaces in downtown Providence. These included Burnside Park, the Bank of America Center, Biltmore Park, and Kennedy Plaza, a large hardscape plaza primarily used as a transit hub for RIPTA buses. Beginning with a series of public workshops facilitated by Project for Public Spaces (PPS), they began to develop a long-term vision to knit these disconnected spaces together and to fill them with a diverse range of uses and activities. They also created a new identity for the entire district, and they began by giving it a new name: Greater Kennedy Plaza.

“Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper”

As further design work and fundraising for Greater Kennedy Plaza got underway, local partners were eager to apply PPS’s “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper” approach right away in order to test and refine some of the ideas in the plan. Immediately, The Greater Kennedy Plaza Coalition (including representatives from the city, RIPTA, and Cornish Associates) launched an ambitious and diverse
programming schedule, including a relocated farmer’s market, a new craft market, regular performances, and special events. The group also hired their first full-time staff person, program manager Deb Dormody.

“Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper” was “a matter of necessity” for this project, explains Cliff Wood, Executive Director of the Downtown Providence Parks Conservancy (formerly the Greater Kennedy Plaza Coalition). “It’s smart to build a space by trying things,” he continues, “See what people want—because for something to be sustained it has to have a constituency. We did that, and lo and behold it worked.”

“Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper is about engaging multiple uses for a space, trying things out, seeing who you can attract, and who will invest in the space in various ways. People can invest financially,” Wood says, “but they can also invest their time in making the space better, or they may invest emotionally by embracing the space, using it, and making it part of their routine or lifestyle.”

The next step in DPPC’s “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper” approach was launching a suite of family programs. Partnering with local parenting blog KIDOinfo, DPPC organized a weekly outdoor Storytime program for families in Burnside Park. The following year they added Art in the Park and a mobile playground. Although these might seem like programs that are suited only for children, DPPC’s Jennifer Smith was intent on creating activities that would appeal to a wide range of users: “We wanted to have high artistic quality and something that would work on a level that parents can appreciate and something that would be fun,” she explains. “There is always something that is engaging parents at a deeper level and that kids can have fun with. One of my favorite things is seeing the parents play. You see the parents start to play with their children and start to play with each other. Adults who don’t even have children start to play.”
The mobile playground began with just one hundred dollars spent at a local store called Benny’s. “This was a ‘Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper’ thing before I even knew what ‘Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper’ was,” Smith recalls. “We put out hula hoops and balls and tennis rackets and an inflatable bowling thing and people started playing with it. People started teaching each other how to hula hoop, [and] it created a sense of community amongst people that might never have otherwise talked.” Indeed, fostering a sense of community has been a primary goal in all of DPPC’s Placemaking work in Greater Kennedy Plaza. Some residents have engaged through the public workshop process, others through contributing time and resources to support programming, and many others by simply participating in programs. It has all led to what Smith sees as a fundamental shift in the way people are interacting in Burnside Park:

“We have moms and dads from the East side, from the West side; people who are here because it’s a RIPTA bus transportation hub; people who spend all day in the park because they are waiting for somewhere else to go; all coming together because of play. It’s a really unique thing to see. You don’t see people together in that way under normal circumstances.”

Our Town

In 2011, an even broader coalition of local partners won a prestigious NEA “Our Town” grant to expand Placemaking efforts in Greater Kennedy Plaza. The funding helped support further development of both the short and long-term visions by a multi-disciplinary team led by local
The long-term vision includes nine distinct zones within Greater Kennedy Plaza. | Image by Union Studio

The “Our Town” grant also supported multiple programs and special events that helped DPPC and their partners further demonstrate Greater Kennedy Plaza’s potential to become a more vibrant, activity-filled place. These efforts culminated in a massive public event, the FirstWorks Festival, which showcased local and international performers. Lynne McCormack, Director of Providence’s Department of Art, Culture, and Tourism, credits the event as a key moment in the solidification of community and political support for further investment in Greater Kennedy Plaza.

“Most significantly,” she explains, “the festival allowed the mayor to clearly understand the new vision for Greater Kennedy Plaza. It was a lightbulb moment for him. The night of the festival Mayor Taveras spent the evening with me and NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman. Seeing the plaza full of activity and people allowed him to understand the transformation that was possible. From that point on, the plaza became an economic development priority for the mayor.”
The Imagination Center

Despite all of this success, there were still many challenges for a group with a small staff and an even smaller budget. In 2013, Burnside Park was selected as a pilot project for the Southwest Airlines Heart of the Community Program. The program provides direct grants plus technical assistance from PPS to local groups to support the activation of public spaces in their communities. After being chosen, DPPC was able to take everything they had learned over several years of “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper” efforts and work with PPS to develop a set of improvements and amenities that would take the park to the next level.

After considering several options, it became clear that creating a home base for DPPC in the park was the best strategy. A small building with a deck could help support programming in a variety of ways. It could be used to store play materials and equipment, it could provide shelter and work space for smaller activities, house an open air reading room, display artwork, and become a landmark for activity in the park. The spaces around it could be used for new movable seating and to define play areas. Eventually the place could support a small food vendor as well.

Families relaxing and reading together at the Imagination Center.

On August 20th, 2013, Providence Mayor Angel Taveras and Megan Lee of Southwest Airlines officially opened the Imagination Center in Burnside Park. Since opening, the Imagination Center has had a catalytic impact on both Burnside Park and Greater Kennedy Plaza as a whole. While other elements of the long-term vision are still years away, the launch of the Imagination Center has been
a key milestone for DPPC. “It’s a critical element to the health of the entire downtown,” says Wood. “It’s an indication that the city, that the public-private partnership, that the community, is investing in the space for kids and for families. It’s an indication that this is succeeding. It builds confidence.”

The Imagination Center has also helped solve a variety of practical challenges that DPPC was facing in the space. “It is like a fulfillment of a dream for me because it’s increased so much the capacity of what we have been able to do,” says Smith. “We used to be able to do a one or two-hour program and that was all that we could manage. And that was maybe once a week or twice a week. Now we are able to house all of our playthings: the Imagination Playground blocks, our library (…) we’re able to put art appropriate tables and chairs out [that work well for art projects]. So we can do things every single day in the park because we have a place from which to do it, we have a home inside the park. And it really is a home to a lot of people. There are families that come here every single day that we are open.”

The People’s Plaza

As major construction projects continue in Greater Kennedy Plaza, including the planned reopening of an updated Kennedy Plaza in January 2015, the spirit of Placemaking is clearly alive and well in Providence. DPPC and their partners have proven that a “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper” approach can create real momentum for lasting change. They've also demonstrated that working in collaboration with the local community is the surest way to create places that truly work for people.

Jennifer Smith sees the impact of the Placemaking process most clearly in the ways that Providence residents have made Burnside Park “a space of their own.” Locals have become less like “audience members” and more like co-creators. People come to DPPC’s programs, but they also use the park for impromptu meetings, as the starting point for group bike rides, and as a venue for artistic and political expression. Smith sees her neighbors integrating the park into their everyday lives, as a place to connect with family and friends, and to deepen their sense of community. “I remember the first day that I saw a family here for the morning programming,” she recalls. “Then they met the spouse who was working downtown, then they had lunch together, and then they came back for a beer after work and played. It was a really wonderful moment to see.”

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