

Downtown Parks

A report on the users, uses and features of successful downtown parks for the Minneapolis Downtown Greening Initiative

The Trust for Public Land

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Top to bottom: Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia; the "bean" in Chicago's Millennium Park; and Campus Martius in Detroit.

Minneapolis Deserves a Downtown Signature Park

Almost every major city in America has a downtown signature park, a place that serves as a central public gathering place, a point of local pride and a status symbol that acts as a city's public heart. These are places that belong to everyone – the rich, the poor, the young, the old, the educated, the non-educated, the employed, the unemployed, residents and out-of-towners.

Minneapolis is at the center of a dynamic 2.5-million-person metropolitan area. Approximately 163,000 people work downtown. In addition, there are conventions which regularly bring in upwards of 5,000 visitors and hotel occupants per day, not to mention transit users, restaurant frequenters, sports and cultural event attendees and others. Moreover, a downtown housing boom has increased downtown residents to an estimated 28,000, with a projection of 30,000 by 2010.¹

Yet, despite this large and vibrant population, and the city's national reputation for a great park system, there is no signature park in downtown Minneapolis. Many people believe that an outstanding new park would add great environmental, cultural and economic value to the center and the city as a whole.

How do People Use Downtown Parks?

While signature urban squares and parks often have outstanding trees, lawns, flower gardens and other ecological amenities, the true measure of success comes from being people-intensive. Users engage in activities that involve other individuals – meeting friends, eating, enjoying a concert, stumbling upon an unexpected exhibition, talking with strangers or just people watching. (*For specific activities, see Table 1.*)

People use these parks as part of an urban experience that combines interests in recreation, socialization, environment and education while also allowing interpretation of cultural, natural and historic resources.

Of course, many users engage in contemplative activities, even despite the hustle and bustle. People relax on a bench with their eyes closed, read a book, or gaze at a fountain. Though not necessarily experiencing nature, they are enjoying a respite in an "urban paradise" – an island of tranquility in a sea of activity.

Famed urban observer Jane Jacobs painted a detailed picture of the "ballet" that takes place in a well-designed and well-used urban park. Referring to a downtown park near a residential neighborhood in Philadelphia, she wrote in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*:

First, a few early-bird walkers who live beside the park take brisk strolls. They are shortly joined, and followed, by residents who cross the park on their way to work out of the district. Next come people from outside the district, crossing the park on their way to work within the neighborhood. Soon after these people have left the square the errand-goers start to come through, many of them lingering, and in mid-morning mothers and small children come in, along with an increasing number of shoppers. Before noon the mothers and children leave, but the square's population continues to grow because of employees on their lunch hour and also because of the people coming from elsewhere to lunch at the art club and the other restaurants around. In the afternoon mothers and children turn up again, the shoppers and errand-goers linger longer, and school children eventually add themselves in. In the afternoon the mothers have left but the homeward-bound workers come through – first those leaving the neighborhood, and then those returning to it. Some of these linger. From then on into the evening the square gets many young people on dates, some who are dining out nearby,

Table 1. How Do People Use Signature Downtown Parks?

Eat at outdoor restaurants	Feed pigeons	Watch or listen to entertainment
Drink beverage or eat food brought from outside the park	Play musical instruments	Skateboard
Buy food or item from open-air market	Talk on cell phones	Ice Skate
Relax in the sun or shade	Play chess, play bocce	Read
Converse with others	Throw a Frisbee, toss balls	Listen to music with headsets
Congregate with others	Walk through the park en route to work	Panhandle
Meet someone	Walk through the park en route to other destination	Attend public celebration
People watch	Rest in between destinations	Attend protest/political event
Gaze at/listen to fountain	Pose for or take photos	Attend a class
Walk dogs or use dog run	Use toilet facilities	Read historical marker
Tend infants, toddlers	Sleep	Surf the Internet or work on laptop computer
Run around, kick or throw balls, play tag (mainly children)	Kiss, hug, or both	Jog through as part of route
View public art	Exercise	Waiting for the bus, streetcar or light rail
Explore labyrinth	Use play equipment or feature	Park a bike

some who live nearby, some who seem to come just because of the nice combination of liveliness and leisure. All through the day, there is a sprinkling of old people with time on their hands, some people who are indigent, and various unidentified idlers.ⁱⁱ

- Passersby. People passing through the area, going or coming from other places;
- Recreational visitors. Those visiting a park for its beauty or for recreation; and
- Visitors to events. People who come for special programs.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jacobs' observations were taken a step further by urban design consultant Jan Gehl. Gehl, who studied public spaces for over 30 years and helped enliven Copenhagen, Denmark into a city of wonderful public spaces, came up with a five-part classification system:

- Everyday users. People who live and work in the area;
- Visitors and customers. People who visit the area from beyond;

Urban sociologist William H. Whyte determined from his studies of New York City plazas in the late 1970s that the "market area" from which park users will travel is within three blocks – and that 80 percent of users will originate from this area. In downtowns, workers may not visit a park during lunchtime to have a sandwich, watch a musical performance, or meet a friend unless they are within a five-minute walk, given an hour or less for lunch. The same goes for

residents, visitors and the like. A study by the Center for City Park Excellence indicated that most people are unwilling to walk more than a quarter-mile to a park, and some will go no farther than one-eighth of a mile.

What Features and Amenities are Found Within Successful Downtown Parks?

It is important to recognize that there are two different kinds of downtown parks – *signature* parks which are designed to appeal to the entire city and region (and to attract tourists); and *neighborhood* parks aimed primarily at local residents living in lofts, condos and apartments on the fringe of the business district. In Minneapolis there is room for both – one within the central business district and one a few blocks away, perhaps in the North Loop neighborhood.

Of the two, the downtown signature park is likely to be the more expensive and difficult to define and design – which is why it is important to have a city-wide conversation about it.

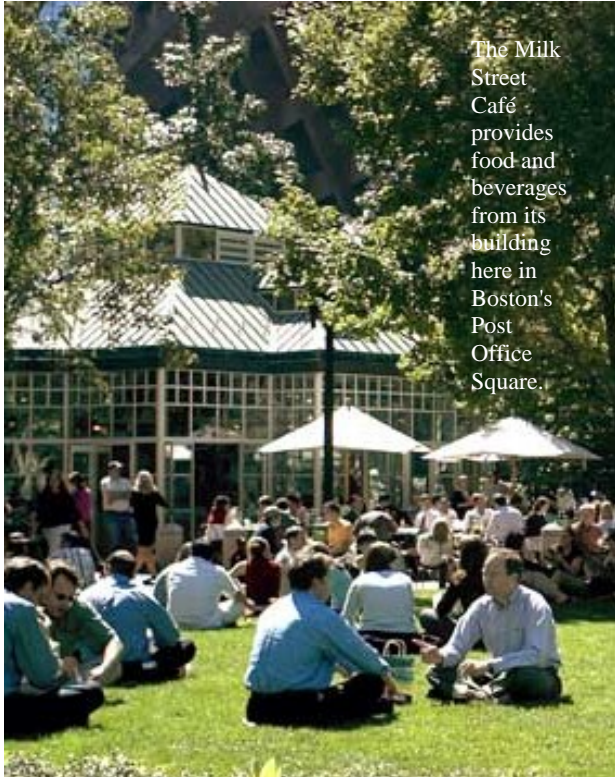
In the last 20 years cities have invested a great deal of thought into signature facilities, and some of them have become extraordinarily successful. A review of those reveals several themes in features and amenities, from the gastronomical to the whimsical. *(See Table 2 for a full list of different features and the Appendix for a glance at five downtown parks.)*

Entertainment & Events. Parks attract people by incorporating places for live music, theater and speakers. Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square has a speaking lectern built into the park for events. The square also was built so that the circular steps also act as an amphitheater for



events. Campus Martius Park in Detroit has a stage that recedes into the ground when not in use.

Rest & Relaxation. William H. Whyte observed that one of the most important components of a successful space is how it provides seating. In Bryant Park, moveable chairs are provided to park-goers who are free to place them wherever. As in the past, parks continue to showcase fountains and other water features that are fun to watch or soothing to hear. In St. Paul, Rice Park has a fountain and Mears Parks a stream that diagonally crosses the park. Post Office Square and Campus Martius both have fountains, small and large, respectively. Post Office Square also has a trellis-covered area for lounging in the shade.



The Milk Street Café provides food and beverages from its building here in Boston's Post Office Square.



The Honkin' Huge burrito stand is one of four specifically designed vendor carts in Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square.

Arts & History. Signature downtown parks are usually pieces of history themselves or are built atop land rich in city history, and the features of parks reflect this. Pioneer Courthouse Square features the entrance columns of the former hotel that graced the site. As central locations of civic activity, the parks also feature symbolic public art or statues. Pioneer Courthouse Square

also has a statue of a man offering his umbrella – reflecting Portlanders spirit and climate. Millennium Park in Chicago features a giant silver sculpture that cost over \$10 million and Chicagoans affectionately have nicknamed it "the bean" for its shape.

Eating & Drinking. Parks provide food carts and actual sit-down cafes on their grounds – some are locally-owned, others are national chains. Post Office Square features the Milk Street Café. Bryant Park has the Bryant Park Grill and four kiosks with different foods and beverages. Pioneer Courthouse Square and Campus Martius have chains, Starbucks Coffee and Au Bon Pain, respectively. A variety of vendor carts is common, too – Pioneer Courthouse has specially designed carts for hot dogs and burritos.

Education. Some parks leverage other nearby civic centers and incorporate them into usage. Bryant Park, next to the New York Public Library offers an outdoor reading room, with moveable chairs and carts carrying books, magazines and periodicals. Children gather for planned reading sessions during the lunch hour and after school.

Recreational. While downtown parks are often small in land area and often not more than two acres, recreational amenities are often provided. Chessboards are common – taking up little space and usually attracting a variety of users. Ice skating rinks are common in colder climates. Space for sports like bocce ball can be provided, and leagues organized. Bryant Park provides a "boule board," a French cousin of bocce.

Logistics. A park could not be safe, clean, accommodating or comfortable without the basic features – lighting at night, signage to explain things, and receptacles for trash. These basic items are not always as boring and routine as they seem, however. Trash receptacles and

Table 2. Features of Downtown Parks

Eating & Drinking

- Vending carts
- Coffee shops
- Cafés
- Restaurants
- Farmers' markets

Recreational

- Ice rinks
- Dog runs
- Spraygrounds
- Playgrounds
- Bocce courts

Transportation

- Bike racks & garages
- Transit stops
- Car parking garages

Logistical

- Trash bins
- Lighting for day & night
- Signage
- Wireless Internet

Arts & History

- Public art
- Weather mains
- Statues & monuments
- Outdoor art galleries

Rest & Relaxation

- Benches & seating
- Fountains & water
- Gardens
- Trees & grass

Entertainment & Events

- Stages
- Speaking lecterns
- Amphitheaters

Educational

- Outdoor classrooms
- "Reading rooms"

lighting can also be designed to be attractive and encourage use.

Transportation. Many parks feature services or uses related to transportation. Parking garages are constructed under several downtown parks, such as Post Office Square in Boston, Union Square in San Francisco, Mellon Square in Pittsburgh, and Memorial Plaza in Cleveland. Bike racks are common and in Chicago's Millennium Park a bike garage, complete with showers, lockers, and staffing provides parking for 300 bikes. Other parks feature transit. Pioneer Courthouse Square has a light rail station and is the center of several bus routes. Tri-Met, the regional transit agency, operates an information and ticketing office within the park. Other parks may enhance existing bus stops.

Different Times of Day. Successful downtown parks provide features and amenities that respond to both daytime and nighttime uses. Campus Martius has a multi-colored ice rink in the winter that changes a normal ice rink into a holiday wonder. Cafes can stay open after dark. Stages can be built with lighting and equipment so that events can be conducted after dark. One of the most popular events in New York City is the HBO-sponsored Monday night movie in Bryant Park, where attendance regularly reaches a whopping 10,000 people.^{iv}

Winter in Downtown Parks. Providing year-round features and uses is integral to a downtown park. Jan Gehl, from work in the Nordic climate of Denmark, says that when he started promoting more public spaces in the 1960s, locals remarked that Danes are not Italians and will not venture out into public spaces, partly because of the cold. It turned out they did – and part of that recipe is enticing usership.^v Ice skating rinks are probably the best-known and most reliable way. Other draws include selling hot soups, coffee, tea, hot chocolate, and cider. Post Office Square's café is open year-round. Parks also bring in Rockefeller Center-like holiday trees, often next to an ice rink, as in Campus Martius. Stages can be built with heaters, concerts or other events kept short and marketed on cold-weather kitsch. In St. Paul, the Winter Carnival ice sculptures are often located in downtown's Rice Park.

Whimsical. Lastly, successful downtown parks feature fun. From the weather guide in Pioneer Courthouse Square to the "bean" and interactive fountains in Millenium Park to the specially-designed Bryant Park chairs, users are fascinated by the playful features provided in these downtown parks.

ⁱ 2007 Adopted Budget. (2007.) City of Minneapolis.

ⁱⁱ Jacobs, Jane. (1961). *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.

ⁱⁱⁱ Houstoun, Lawrence O. Jr.. (October, 2006). "Ingredients for Successful Public Spaces." *Urban Land*.

^{iv} Ryzik, Melena. (July 27, 2007). "Midsummer Night's Screen." *The New York Times*.

^v Vogel, Jennifer. (April, 2006.) "The Long Walk." *The Rake Magazine*.

Appendix: The Basics of Five Successful Downtown Signature Parks

<i>Park</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Size (acres)</i>	<i>Description of Park's Location</i>	<i>Management Structure</i>	<i>Features</i>	<i>Brief History</i>
Pioneer Courthouse Square	Portland, Ore.	1.56	Heart of downtown, adjacent to historic courthouse, retail, major transit crossing	Management Agreement between the City and a 501(c)3 non-profit organization; separate downtown BID provide cleaning and security.	75-seat surround sound theater; a sculpture of a man offering his umbrella called "Allow Me"; bronze chess boards, amphitheater, sign posts showing distances to Portland's nine sister cities, the former Portland Hotel entry gate, waterfall fountain, the "keystone" lectern for speaking events, a weather machine that shows different symbols for different weather, Portland Oregon Visitor Information Center (includes visitor information, a tour service, Tri-Met transit customer assistance); Starbucks coffee shop, Bank of America ATM, wireless Internet, and vending carts for flowers, Philly cheese steaks, hot dogs and burritos.	Formerly home to historic Portland Hotel; then parking garage; opened in 1986.
Post Office Square	Boston, Mass.	1.7	Heart of financial district, between Boston Common and harbor.	Privately managed by the Friends of Post Office Square (which also runs parking garage)	Milk Street Café, moveable chairs, a 24-hour staffed underground parking garage, benches, a garden trellis, two "fountain sculptures," a small open lawn, shoe shining, trees, decorative garden, park designed for performances using the open lawn, " and an information kiosk.	Cobblestone plaza until 1954; then four-story parking garage; in 1981 garage demolished; Friends of Post Office square successfully built parking garage underground and park above.
Bryant Park	New York, N.Y.	8	Midtown Manhattan, next to the New York Public Library.	Managed by the Bryant Park Restoration Corp. (part of Bryant Park Business Improvement District); improvements approved by the City's Landmarks Commission.	Bryant Park Grill & Café, wireless Internet, chess tables, gardens that include seasonal planting displays, a "boule" board, moveable chairs, a "Reading Room" (custom designed carts have books and newspapers, and children's and other programs are offered at lunch time and after work), a carousel, four kiosks that separately host coffee & hot beverages, creamery, soups & salads, and sandwiches, and a 170' by 100' ice rink.	Designated as a public space as far back as the 1700s; Bryant Park named in 1884; in 1980 Bryant Park Restoration Corporation created to manage park; in 1988 construction of two restaurant pavilions and four concession kiosks; most used park per square foot in country.
Millennium Park	Chicago, Ill.	24.5	Between the Loop and lakefront, near art museum, transit hub	Division of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs; aided by non-profit partner, the Millennium Park, Inc.	Underground parking, commuter rail station, band shell and large amphitheater lawn, music theater, interactive fountain with projected images, pedestrian bridge, the "Cloud Gate" sculpture, a landscaped promenade, various gardens with native plants, an ice rink, and restaurant	For years the site of railroad tracks and parking lots; in 1997 Mayor Richard M. Daley directed plans for a new music venue to be built over the active tracks and new parking garage; evolved into mega-project costing over \$400 million; opened in 2004.
Campus Martius	Detroit, Mich.	1.6	Employment center, at confluence of the City's main street, Woodward Avenue, Michigan Avenue, and Fort and Monroe Streets.	Managed, maintained and operated under a long-term contract with the City of Detroit by the non-profit Detroit 300 Conservancy.	Ice rink, holiday tree, wireless internet, park café, fountain, "water wall" near sitting areas, Michigan Soldiers & Sailors Monument, two 22 foot stainless steel "corner markers," two performance/event stages that recess into the ground when not in use.	Detroit's original central gathering point; lost to expanded roads; civic group Detroit 300 and City targeted area for legacy project in 1990s; plan approved in 2000 to redesign streets, create park; opened in 2004.