

● DTLA, Public Space

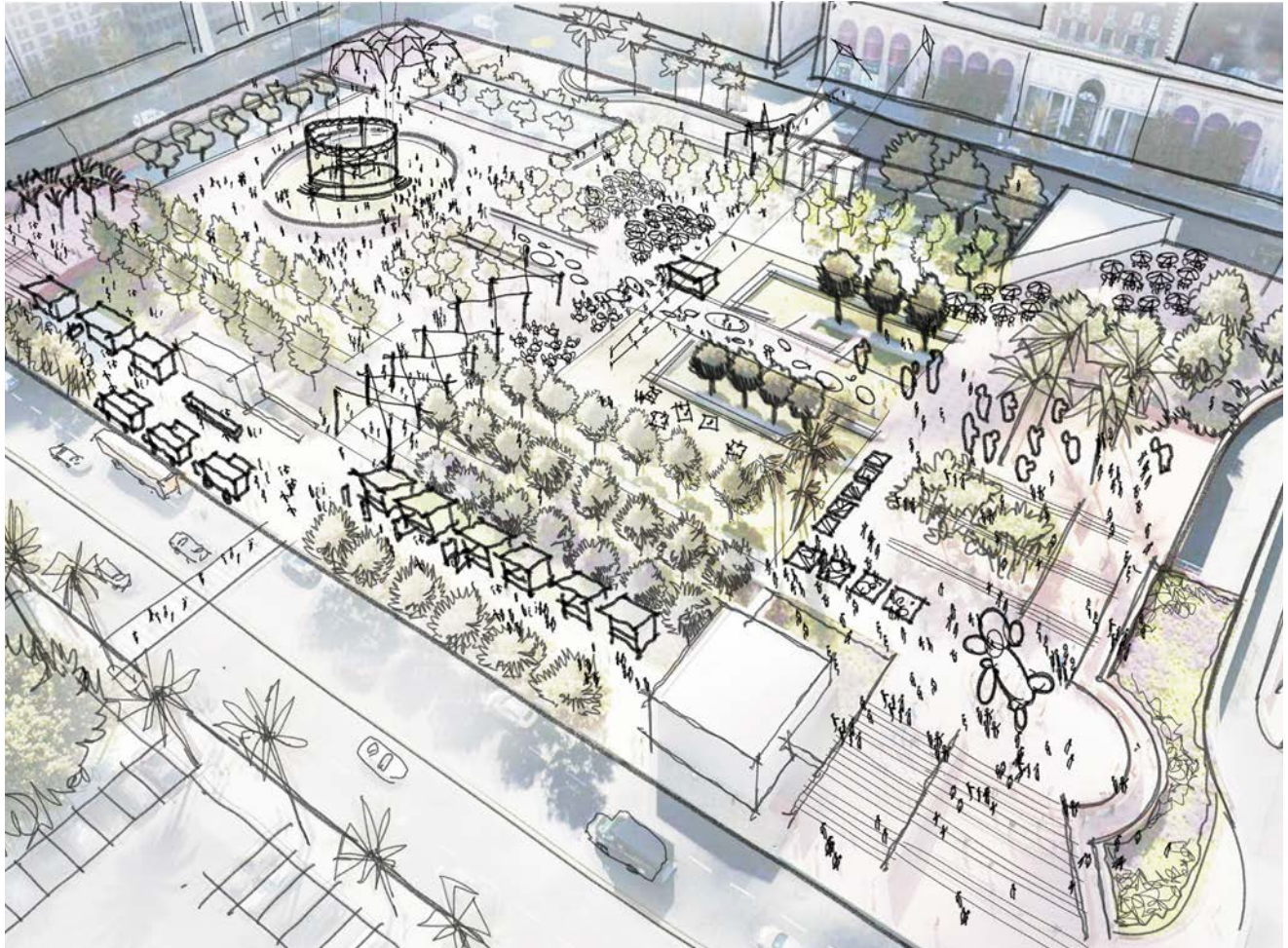


ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN ERIC CHUNG

Downtown Los Angeles is at an important inflection point in its ongoing evolution, most immediately due to the catalytic impact of shifts in the nature of office work, but more broadly because of how it has grown and changed over the last 20 years, and what that means for the next 20.

This Downtown Renaissance, which transformed DTLA from a 9-to-5 business district to a 24/7 mixed-use destination, brought a wave of development that has accommodated an explosion in the residential population – from under 20,000 to over 90,000 – and tourism, with over 17 million annual visitors.

One of the crucial factors in DTLA’s continued success across all of its sectors – office, residential, retail, hospitality, arts & culture, dining and nightlife – will be how the public space they all share is adapted and improved to meet the changing needs and preferences of its increasingly varied population.

DTLA is a major commercial and economic hub, as well as a vibrant residential community, popular tourist destination, and important center of culture and government administration. Its public space is the connective tissue that bridges all these sectors and weaves them into a dynamic urban place.



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Urban Lifestyle & The Public Realm



In surveys conducted by the DCBID over the past decade, one of the most consistent findings is that people choose DTLA because they want an active urban lifestyle. A significant aspect of that lifestyle is the walkability that connects them with their community and all that Downtown has to offer.

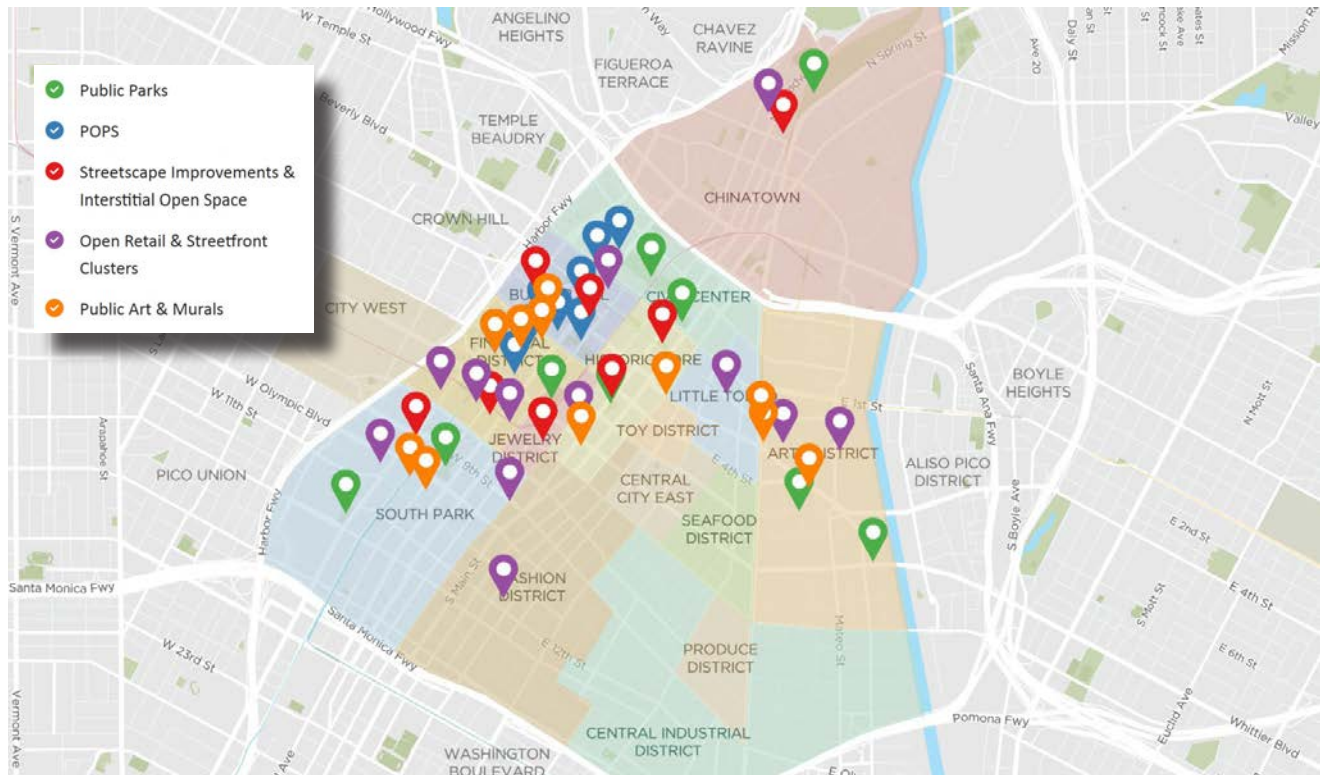
While walkability is common to cities around the world, it is relatively unique for Los Angeles and one of the qualities that differentiates DTLA. It attracts residents, workers, and visitors, all of which support the restaurants, nightlife, and amenities that comprise the dynamic urban experience they desire. An active, attractive, and safe public realm is a critical component in a virtuous cycle of growth and improvement.

Maximizing the value of the public realm requires leveraging all the elements that contribute to it and enhancing the connections between them. This begins with design and extends through maintenance and programming, all of which falls under the realm of placemaking.

Placemaking is about creating, improving, and activating spaces with people in mind. Successful placemaking requires the resources, effort, and attention of a range of groups, organizations, and agencies, as well as a community of engaged residents, businesses, and property owners.

Many of the most successful placemaking strategies are relatively inexpensive, especially in terms of the value they can provide. Failing to make these kinds of investments brings the risk of losing much of what fuels the energy and vitality of DTLA.

From Parks & POPS to Sidewalks & Alleyways



Public space in the city encompasses an array of different types of assets, sharing the one core attribute that they are accessible to the general public.

The most familiar and prominent form of public space is public parks. Owned and operated by the government, they are intended to be places of activity for people to recreate, relax, and reflect. In the urban context, they can serve as key nexus points for a variety of communities.

Dense urban centers like DTLA don't always have a lot of major public parks, but they often have a collection of privately owned and operated, but publicly accessible, spaces known as POPS.

DTLA has a wealth of POPS, which have many of the same qualities as a public park and can be adapted to serve a broader mix of users and uses. These spaces have tremendous potential to enhance the DTLA experience if they are appropriately utilized, managed, and programmed.

Connecting the parks and POPS are sidewalks, walkways, and interstitial spaces such as alleyways. While these are the most traversed public spaces in Downtown, they often receive the least attention, in part because making significant improvements involves a range of complex factors. Nevertheless, several significant streetscape improvements have been delivered over the years in Downtown LA.

Because the visual appeal of the streetscape fundamentally contributes to walkability, it is also worth considering how building facades, storefronts, fencing, and other private structures contribute to the overall experience of the public realm. Of particular importance are popular destinations such as open-air retail centers and areas where there is a high concentration of retail storefronts.

Relatedly, art can be a critical component of the public space experience: whether it is officially designated as public art; private artwork that is visible to the public such as the many murals that use full buildings as their canvas; or even a performance that takes place in the public realm. This map includes just a small sampling of well over 300 individual pieces of public sculpture and murals in DTLA.

Making Places Great

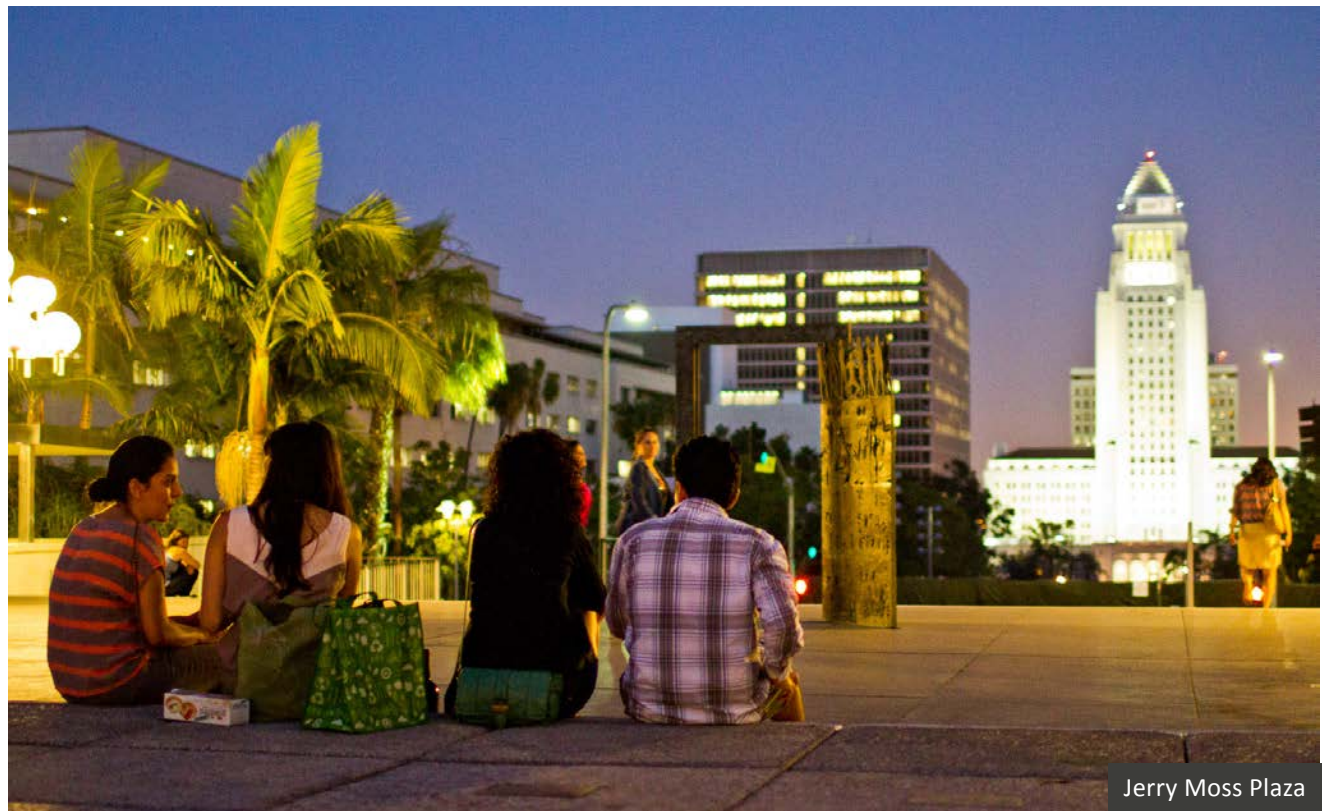
A common misconception about creating appealing public spaces is that it is all about physical design. Even the most thoughtfully designed public spaces can fail to provide much value if they are not actively maintained, managed, and programmed. Placemaking, simply defined, is about enhancing the overall experience that people have when they are in a space. While this can seem somewhat nebulous, one of the major thought leaders in this area, Project for Public Spaces, has developed a useful tool that effectively breaks it down into four key elements that make for a great place.



“In evaluating thousands of public spaces around the world, PPS has found that to be successful, they generally share the following four qualities:

1. they are accessible;
1. people are engaged in activities there;
1. the space is comfortable and has a good image;
1. and finally, it is a sociable place: one where people meet each other and take people when they come to visit.”

While each of these qualities can be somewhat subjective, they provide some useful context through which to consider placemaking efforts.



Jerry Moss Plaza

Placemaking in DTLA



Efforts to enhance and activate public space is not a new concept for Downtown LA. Spurred by growth in the residential community and increasing tourist visitation, along with evolving demand from office tenants, the City and various stakeholders have undertaken a wide range of placemaking projects. As a result, the past 20 years provides many examples and case studies of how even small improvements can have a big impact while major investments can transform entire areas.

Grand Park

Opened in 2012, Grand Park has all four of the Project for Public Spaces “great place” qualities described earlier and has become a go-to destination for unique programming including concerts, wellness, art, and more. And on hot days in the summer, its water feature is a major draw for families.

LA State Historic Park

A 32-acre grassy open space extending out from Chinatown, at the north end of Downtown, LA State Historic Park is a brownfield investment located on a former rail station that has already helped spur a dynamic mix development in the surrounding area.

Pershing Square Renovation

Ground was recently broken on the first phase of the long-awaited renovation of Pershing Square, which is intended to open the space up by removing the existing perimeter walls and structures and replacing them with trees and green space, reconnecting the park to the surrounding neighborhood.

POPS for People

One of the reasons POPS have so much potential is that they have both built-in user bases and committed stewards. Expansion of their purpose and programming is an opportunity for collaboration across groups of stakeholders and constituents.

Bunker Hill Campus

Two major recent renovations of POPS on Bunker Hill demonstrate the shifting priorities of property owners. In each case, purely decorative elements have been replaced with open and usable space.

Activating the POPS

Beyond shifting designs, owners of POPS have embraced a core element of placemaking by bringing in a variety of different kinds of activations to engage and enliven.

Future of Placemaking



Looking now to the future, a key consideration of where to focus placemaking efforts and investments is where they will impact the most people. To begin with, it is useful to see which places are the most active in Downtown. Using location-based intelligence from Placer.ai, we can see which parts of Downtown had the highest volume of visitors in 2022.



Armed with this information and the insights it provides, the next step is to improve and activate the network in ways that encourage people to utilize it. Using a variety of placemaking tools, it is possible to reimagine how space is being used to promote greater engagement.

In early 2020, the DCBID hired architecture and urban design firm CRTKL to be part of a collaborative effort to conduct a Placemaking Audit of central DTLA. Together with designers and all-around creative thinkers, Bureau Spectacular, CRTKL conducted a study that assessed existing conditions and identified key placemaking opportunities and locations.

“This placemaking study began with a detailed inventory of underutilized locations in the Downtown Center and ranked them across multiple factors. The resulting 15 finalists were

reimagined – tapping into their true potential to promote public well-being, engage the community, and attract creative urbanites.” – CRTKL, DTLA Placemaking Opportunities Study

While these kinds of initiatives can result in an improved aesthetic appeal, they intend to also create engaging destinations that people want to experience and to create synergies between the other public realm assets identified earlier.

The Importance of Investing in Place



Investments in placemaking are about building on what is already inherently compelling about DTLA – a unique sense of place and a diverse community that is passionate about it. Enhancing public spaces creates a more welcoming environment that draws people in, connects them, and encourages them to explore and engage more deeply, strengthening their relationship to both the place and the community.

A commitment to improving public space will be even more important as Downtown’s significance for the region expands in the coming years. With its DTLA 2040 plan, the City of LA envisions the population of DTLA more than doubling to over 200,000 and playing a major part in meeting the region’s future housing needs. Even more housing is planned for the major transit corridors that connect to Downtown.

Massive investments have also been made in expanding LA’s transit system, which is centered in DTLA. Finally, in the next 5 years, Downtown Los Angeles will play a starring role in two of the biggest sporting events in the world, the 2026 World Cup and the 2028 Summer Olympic Games. Hundreds of thousands will visit DTLA, experiencing its streets and public spaces in person; millions more will do so virtually.

When all is said and done, tens of billions of dollars will have been invested, greatly enhancing the profile and importance of DTLA. Placemaking activations, like the ones discussed here, are not only an effective way to leverage those billions into a more welcoming Downtown experience, they are critical to the success of those investments. And because Downtown is the place where the largest number of Angelenos can gather and connect, especially for those who rely on public transit, Downtown is the one place where everyone in the region can truly benefit from those investments.



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