



Speech by Rip Rapson:

Connecting Detroit's Assets Through Strategic Placemaking

April 11, 2013, address to the inaugural meeting of the Project for Public Spaces Leadership Council.

April 22, 2013

Good morning. I would like to extend a warm welcome to the guests who have arrived in Detroit for this inaugural [Project for Public Spaces Leadership Council meeting](#). I'm told that we have representation from 25 states and 10 countries. Leave it to the Project for Public Spaces to assemble such an impressive and committed group. Thank you for choosing Detroit.

You are joining us at an exciting time. Last night, our community came together for the kickoff of [Art X Detroit](#), a five-day visual, performing and cultural smorgasbord that applauds the vibrancy of this city and the role that creative expression plays in transforming the way we experience Detroit. I hope that during your stay you will have an opportunity to participate in the many events scheduled through Sunday.

I want to thank Fred Kent, Steve Davies and the PPS team for including me in your gathering. The Project for Public Spaces is the only organization of its kind and influence, and over the years it has provided the most meaningful tools we have in our tool kit to transform the places we care about.

Finally, let me welcome to the members of the Detroit Neighborhood Forum who have also joined us this morning. For the last five years, we've gathered local banks, foundations, nonprofits and governmental agencies – together with national partners – to share ideas and align our resources to revitalize Detroit's neighborhoods.

Places Matter

Essayist and author Rebecca Solnit has observed: “Places matter. Their rules, their scale, their design include or exclude civil society, pedestrianism, equality, diversity (economic and otherwise). ... They map our lives.”¹

Placemaking is, indeed, about how we create the map for civic life. It’s more than just enhancing a location. It’s about creating an essence – identifying, elevating or assembling a collection of visual, cultural, social and environmental qualities that imbue a location with meaning and significance.²

Whether we engage places through the arts, neighborhood development or environmental stewardship, acts of placemaking bring our aspirations into focus. They drive vibrancy. They enable us to create an emotional bond with our community. When we’re able to connect to a city or a neighborhood through an individual or shared experience of its public spaces, there’s a magnetic pull. You want to stay committed. You want to invest. You want to build a future. These are the preconditions for civic transformation.

A focus on place enables one to come at challenges and opportunities from a different perspective, offering up almost limitless possibilities for innovation and creativity. And that kind of creativity is essential if we hope to stay abreast of the seismic economic, technological, ecological and demographic shifts ricocheting through our communities. These changes will require that we continually re-examine our assumptions, recalibrate our tools and reassess what constitutes success.

This is all magnified in our cities.³ Cities present a density of activities, skills and ideas that serendipitously or intentionally circulate, recombine and catalyze, creating the preconditions for innovation. Their complex networks and diverse subcultures are conducive to the dismantling of stale and unproductive approaches to intractable problems in favor of the new or imaginatively recycled – a perfect recipe for placemaking.

In fact, it’s a perfect recipe to create a new blend of placemaking and longer-term community planning. A recipe that carries the outlines of a new urban agenda in this country. A recipe that holds the potential to birth truly resilient cities – those able to absorb and adapt to the stresses of change while retaining their essential functions, structures and identities. Those resilient cities will, in turn, be those that adopt a people-centered approach and utilize public spaces in ways that build connectivity, sustainability and quality of place.

The Changing Face of Detroit

You all live in, work in or visit places that have many of these qualities. But I want to suggest that this blended approach of placemaking and community planning may play out more powerfully here in Detroit than anywhere else in the country.

Although Detroit will not regain its peak population of nearly 2 million people, planning and placemaking can combine to play an important role in right-sizing existing networks for a smaller population, making them more vibrant, more engaging and better equipped for greater diversity.

It can also contribute to building citizen buy-in to the city's future form and function by offering meaningful venues for engagement, strengthening bonds of social capital and creating new opportunities to connect to the city's dynamics of growth.

We don't have to take this entirely on faith. The amount of ground Detroit has covered in the last five years is dizzying:

- We have reoriented our gateway through the redevelopment of the east riverfront, which now attracts millions of visitors a year. Faye Nelson of the [Riverfront Conservancy](#) has been an absolutely spectacular steward of this progress.
- We have accelerated the pace and scale of development in the downtown and Midtown districts –the economic and cultural backbone of the city. For those of you who haven't kept up with [Dan Gilbert, the founder and chairman of Quicken Loans](#), his single-handed re-imagination of the central business district may be unprecedented in modern urban America. And for those of you haven't had the pleasure of meeting Sue Mosey, who leads [Midtown Detroit Inc.](#), her skill and tenacity has made Midtown a beehive of residential, commercial and cultural activity.
- We have broken through 40 years of futility and frustration to establish the scaffolding for an integrated regional mass transit system, anchored by the [M-1 Rail](#) project, which will break ground yet this year. The heroes here are Matt Cullen of [Quicken Loans](#); [Roger Penske](#), the auto racing legend and chairman of the [Penske Corp.](#); and Kresge's Laura Trudeau, who leads our [Detroit Program](#).

And, we've birthed something called [Detroit Future City](#). It is in equal parts a vision document, a decision-making framework and an investment blueprint. The plan pivots on land use – on how to re-imagine the city's physical reconfiguration. It is a guide to how we can concentrate investments in the city's nodes of

strength – Woodward Avenue, downtown, along the river, in stable, well-maintained neighborhoods. And it's a guide to how to repurpose underutilized land in ways that move parcels from the liability side of the ledger to the asset side. The plan was developed by eight teams, drawn from throughout the world, of architects, economists, planners, engineers, community development specialists – as well as residents. It received input from some 150,000 Detroit residents in arguably the most sophisticated community engagement process that has been used anywhere in America. The *Detroit Free Press* wrote: “The long-awaited strategic framework is more than a plan for stanching the city's infrastructural bleeding – it's a blueprint for how a decaying city can reinvent itself. It's not a patch; it's a revolution.”

How Placemaking Has Taken Root

Detroit is no stranger to placemaking, and the Project for Public Spaces has been an embedded partner in many of the transformation efforts underway.

PPS helped restore Detroit's heart and spine through its counsel on the design of [Campus Martius Park](#), a 2.5-acre, \$20 million public space in heart of downtown Detroit. All major avenues in Detroit radiate out from Campus Martius, and the park has become a magnet for the revival of the city, attracting billions in new investment in the blocks around it. In 2010, Campus Martius received national recognition as the first-ever winner of the [Urban Land Institute](#) Amanda Burden Urban Open Space Award.

If Campus Martius is Detroit's heart, then [Eastern Market](#) is a vital artery. And once again, PPS was there for Detroit as the market's leaders worked to design what is now considered the focal point of the nation's fresh-food movement. Philanthropic investments have transformed the century-old complex of sheds at Eastern Market, the nation's largest public market, into a hub of more than 1,000 community gardens, a growing cohort of restaurants specializing in locally grown and raised products and a network of neighborhood farmer's markets.

The tapestry of Detroit's iconic places continues to inspire the placemaking movement. PPS is currently partnering with Kresge and the Kellogg Foundation to reinvigorate local economies through a placemaking initiative for neighborhood farmers markets in five Detroit neighborhoods.

Just two weeks ago, Dan Gilbert revealed his PPS-led placemaking process to develop “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper” improvements to Cadillac Square, Capitol Park and Grand Circus Park. It is spectacular work. We're delighted that PPS has agreed to expand its efforts to include the Detroit Riverfront and [Belle Isle](#)

through a Kresge grant.

And PPS's influence has spread to other parts of our civic culture.

The city's 4,000 artists have, through their creative placemaking, brought an infectious energy, spirit of optimism and sense of tangible progress to Detroit's revitalization. They have been at the vanguard of efforts to ingeniously repurpose abandoned property, re-imagine underutilized land, and otherwise pioneer new ways of thinking about the city's future. A handful of examples:

- [Power House Productions](#) is an effort by artists in collaboration with neighborhood residents to purchase and create an environment of cultural assets out of vacant homes, including the development of self-sustainable homes, for as little as \$100.
- The [Sugar Hill Arts District](#), a once-thriving jazz center, is experiencing a welcomed cultural renewal as new restaurants, galleries, businesses and residential spaces fill vacant and underutilized structures.
- [The Alley Project](#), known as the TAP Gallery, has transformed an alley in Southwest Detroit into a permanent outdoor exhibition space dedicated to aerosol street art by local artists and youth.
- In the Redford Theatre district, small-business owners and [the Detroit Dream Project](#) artist's village are working together to uplift and revitalize a west side Detroit neighborhood.

Detroit is giving a novel twist to its century-long tradition of a place where people make things by creating spaces equipped with the tools, materials and other conditions for people of all ages to experiment. The [FabLab Detroit](#), for example, offers artistic-minded entrepreneurs, metalworkers, mixed-media artists, woodworkers and digital fabricators the tools and space needed to practice their craft. It's one of at least 15 such makerspaces in town.

A Blended Model of Planning and Placemaking

These examples demonstrate just how compelling “quicker, lighter, cheaper” approaches are in a city hungry for change in its physical condition. What is so noteworthy, and welcome, is the extent to which those approaches build on our efforts to construct an enduring, sustainable and comprehensive planning and investment framework.

Rebuilding a city requires people thinking and acting toward a common purpose at every horizon. Even factoring in the urgency of putting tangible wins on the board, we would be well-advised not to lose sight of the bigger picture we're all working to create. This greater vision is elegantly captured in Detroit Future City, where Detroiters spent two years coming together to establish the parameters for the city's transformation and to identify pathways to greater opportunity for all Detroiters – on a five-year horizon, a 10-year horizon and a 20-year horizon.

Modern Detroit was initiated by ideas and actions on a grand scale – the epitome of Daniel Burnham's admonition to “make no small plans.”⁴ One only has to look at the [Dime Building](#), the [David Whitney Building](#) and the [Ford Building](#) – all designed by Burnham – to convey this message. We can capture that spirit again, but we must temper it with the intelligence and power of the approach PPS has pioneered and cultivated.

Indeed, there is a wonderful elegance to fitting placemaking within the larger frame. Quicker *and* longer, lighter *and* more enduring, cheaper *and* more investment-intensive, all fitting hand-in-glove. Burnham was right about no small plans, but so, too, is Fred Kent about not getting stuck in the ponderous, the rigid and the pretentious. Each feeds, and is propelled by, the other.

Almost 25 years ago I wrote something called the State of the Urban Environment Address for my then-boss, [Mayor Don Fraser of Minneapolis](#). That speech noted:

The act of urban design and planning has very practical consequences for the city. It is concerned with creating a cohesive whole. It sets the stage for public life, defining how well our buildings, streets and parks meet the needs of our citizens. It determines how people move through the city, whether by foot or by car. It creates an identity, whether on the skyline or on a neighborhood street. It establishes those structures and places that we see as having enduring value and as being worthy of protection.”⁵

What I was talking about then is what we're on the verge of realizing in 2013 in Detroit: the cross-walking of the worlds of planning, design and placemaking.

Let's move at warp speed to create pop-up retail, foster networks of neighborhood farmers markets, reconfigure public spaces, carve out pedestrian passageways and celebrate countless other granular, human-scale ideas. But let's move no less quickly to animate the larger, more contextual architecture of

revitalization and redevelopment of Detroit Future City. We have in place the architecture of governance and continuing citizen engagement, the vehicle of implementation and the first wave of committed resources. It's time to connect the dots and align the work. We are ecstatic that PPS will be our full partners in doing just that.

10 Principles

As I imagine what that's going to look like, I want to borrow a number of principles from PPS's work.

Because you do almost everything in lists of 10, here are my suggestions for 10 principles that could shape how this meeting of the worlds, which might be termed strategic placemaking, can land in Detroit. If the principles sound familiar, it's because many are already central to what you do – or because I've shamelessly stolen them from some of you in the audience:

Principle 1: Nest placemaking within a compelling, community-generated vision and tie it inextricably and on an ongoing basis to the experiences and aspirations of the local community.⁶

Principle 2: Integrate the arts as a way of creating social and economic vitality and reinforcing community identity.⁷

Principle 3: Link at every possible opportunity to a community's heritage, while creating wide berth for exploring a community's changing form and function.⁸

Principle 4: Leverage the creative potential already present in a place.⁹

Principle 5: Protect and enhance the city's natural topology as the heart of its visual heritage.¹⁰

Principle 6: Ask the Climate Question: How will this action stabilize or further destabilize our climate?¹¹

Principle 7: Elevate the primacy of sustainability and resilience – how will the decisions we make affect the city's long-term ability to absorb and adjust to changing economic, social, demographic, political and ecological conditions?¹²

Principle 8: Acknowledge the interdependence of urban systems and incorporate major infrastructure projects into the existing physical, social and economic fabric.¹³

Principle 9: Create an ever-broader array of practitioners who possess the new skill sets and mindsets demanded.¹⁴

Principle 10: Ensure that benefits inure to the full economic, demographic and political spectrum.

When You Change the Place, You Change the Trajectory of Opportunity

The author Alec Waugh once remarked, “You can fall in love at first sight with a place.”¹⁵ We believe that Detroit has within its reach the ability to once again become that kind of city, a city with an array of unforgettable places. There’s a robust and multifaceted machinery at work to expand opportunity and support the continued emergence of a vibrant and essential Detroit unimaginable to some outside observers.

Placemaking matters in Detroit because it affords us a chance to recapture the soul of this community and change the trajectory of opportunity.

Congratulations again to the Project for Public Spaces on the inaugural launch of the placemaking leadership council, and thank you all for your commitment to Detroit.

¹Solnit, R. *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics*, p. 9 (University of California Press: 2007).

²McMahon, E. “The Place Making Dividend.” *Planning Commissioners Journal*, No. 80, p. 16 (Fall 2010).

³For the first time in history, more than half of the world’s population now lives in towns and cities. By 2030, 5 billion people will inhabit cities. United Nations Population Fund.

⁴“Make No Little Plans: Daniel Burnham and the American City.” Public Broadcasting Service. September 2010.

⁵Fraser, D. M. “The State of the Urban Environment: Minneapolis Urban Planning and Design in the 1990s.” November 1, 1990.

⁶Adapted from the Detroit Future City Strategic Framework plan, Australian Institute of Landscape Architects Policy Statement on Placemaking and the Zuidas Amsterdam Integrated Placemaking Strategy.

⁷“Principles of Creative Placemaking.” ArtPlace.

⁸Adapted from “The State of the Urban Environment,” *op cit*.

⁹“Principles of Creative Placemaking.” ArtPlace.

¹⁰State of the Urban Environment: Minneapolis Urban Planning and Design in the 1990s. November 1, 1990.

¹¹Rapson, R. “The Fierce Urgency of Now: Getting the Climate Question Right,” address to the University

of Michigan Law School (April 9, 2013).

¹²*Id.*

¹³Adapted from Australian Institute of Landscape Architects Policy Statement, the Zofnass Program for Sustainable Infrastructure at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and Zuidas Amsterdam Integrated Placemaking Strategy; Arup Consulting. “Design Yearbook 2011 and Approach to Integrated Urbanism.”

¹⁴Rapson, op cit.

¹⁵Waugh, A. *Hot Countries: A Travel Book*. (Bloomsbury: 2011).