Research Overview

This report summarises the findings of four months of research on public realm planning from international examples. Research involved extensive internet searches, personal interviews, as well as telephone conversations with planners and university professors.

This *Research Overview* draws on key similarities and differences of the reviewed projects to generate important considerations of public realm planning. Comments taken from personal and telephone interviews are included as well. Following the *Research Overview* are project by project summaries of key public realm plans, interviews, and related documents. In cases where this report is accompanied with the Appendix binder, several original reports and information brochures are included for reference.

A wide variety of approaches to planning the public realm are included in this report. Together, a spectrum of important components to a comprehensive public realm plan are introduced. However, no single example should be regarded as truly comprehensive on its own—each plan has unique elements and many have noteworthy absences.

A cautionary note on "innovation" in public realm planning:
The reports of many of the projects included in this research are referred to as "innovative" projects. It should be noted that it is often the author or the agency responsible for the project that considers the project innovative. In cases in which a precedent is indeed being set, it is not necessarily a good precedent. "Innovative" can, in fact, be quite bad.

In most cases, however, "innovative" does imply that there is something unique about the approach, the scope, the intention, or the outcome of the project.

A cautionary note on international examples / the importance of context:
The examples of public realm planning included in this report are intended to represent a unique component or approach to planning in the public realm. Some effort was taken to ensure that examples are from a variety of contexts (Australian, European, Canadian, and American). It should be noted, however, that great caution should be taken when considering international examples of planning. European cities, with their age, face a very different set of opportunities and constraints as North American or Australian cities. But while the physical structure (grid cities) of Australian and American cities is similar to Canadian cities (and therefore, some of the physical characteristics of the public realm) the planning context can differ dramatically.

In an interview with Larry Beasley, co-director of planning at the City of Vancouver, the role of philanthropy in the public realm improvements of American cities was discussed. It is not uncommon for a specific public space to be "upgraded" as a result of a single donation or fund. This, coupled with a planning environment which may lack influence, leads to a place by place, opportunistic evolution of the public realm. As a result, agencies such as New York's Project for Public Spaces focus on small-scale projects independent of a master-plan. The cultural and bureaucratic context of cities, then, can be seen as a driving force behind the nature of approach to public realm planning. With this understanding, citing international examples of public realm planning may become misleading. Nevertheless, international examples and their various contexts do provide examples of breadth of scope and involvement into the many component parts of a comprehensive public realm plan.

Should public realm planning occur on a "comprehensive" basis? / The importance of hierarchy of places:

Even in examples which are generally considered to be "comprehensive" in scope, public realm planning rarely (if ever) is concerned with more than a city district (typically the city centre) or neighbourhood.

Patrick Condon, Professor at UBC's School of Landscape Architecture and the James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Liveable Environments, believes that a comprehensive understanding of the city in its regional context is required. From this, a hierarchy of places (within reason) can be formed and the health of individual sites can than be improved in relation to its role in the regional context. *From the James Taylor Chair website:* "Just as the health of the human body is dependent on the health of the individual cells in it, so too is the urban region dependent on the health of the individual sites that comprise it. Yet this self evident fact has received little attention within a research culture more focused on problems than on places. We hope to partially redress this imbalance. As such we are exploring how site and neighbourhood design can influence the ecological, social, and economic health of the region." The need for a hierarchy of place is practical, according to Condon, within reason. An analogy to the body is used to explain: nobody would argue that the head is more important than the fingertip, but it is important to understand that the head and the finger work together and relate.

Andy Schwarz, representative of New York's Project for Public Spaces (PPS), maintains that comprehensive "master planning" of the public realm is exactly what their agency works to avoid. Instead, PPS advocates for a phased and incremental process of public realm planning and claim that the process itself is something that should be enjoyed. A slow, incremental

approach—both over the short and long term—is the preferred method.

Larry Beasley, co-director of planning for the City of Vancouver, spoke about the need for a "basic ecology" between public and private places to exist. A complete understanding of the issues surrounding a place needs to occur before the appropriate planning begins. This means, for example, that while it is valuable to refer to a street as a "high street" and program and furnish the street accordingly, it must be carried out in a balance with the actual potential use of the street. A type of activity cannot occur simply because its been programmed for or furnished. At the same time, however, a place will not be able to successfully accommodate a particular activity without a program or the appropriate furnishings.

Jan Gehl's study in Adelaide, *Public Spaces and Public Life*, provides an example of an in-depth understanding of the public realm that precedes recommendations. The study includes well-presented data on the quality of public space and how it is being used.

Is Comprehensive Public Realm Planning a long-term or short-term activity?

Most public realm planning refers to the long-term preservation or enhancement of the public realm. In some cases, such as the *Master Plan for the Marcy-Holmes Neighborhood* (Minneapolis, Minnesota), the public realm plan is embedded in a long-range visioning document with input from neighbourhood residents.

CityDesign of the City of Seattle created both a 10-year and a 100-year vision of *The Blue Ring: Connecting Places* that allows for a long-range strategy from which future efforts can be co-ordinated as well as for a specific plan for immediate improvements and policy changes. This intent for immediate action may satisfy concerns over investing in a long-range plan;

immediate, tangible results may generally be easier to support for many city officials than long-range strategies.

The *Oxford Public Realm Strategy* (primarily a physical plan) preceded any specific plans, costing, or time-tabling and serves, instead, as a set of guidelines for future development / changes. It is noted, however, that a significant opportunity for physical improvements to the public realm is in the near future as major changes to the traffic patterns in the city are scheduled to be progressively implemented.

Incorporating environmental awareness into a public realm plan?

Seattle's *The Blue Ring* plan begins with a recognition of Cascadia—the regional context—and situates Seattle's city center within that context. In addition to providing a framework for the enhancement of the public realm, it seeks to address issues of water management and ecosystem repair. The inclusion of water as a major feature in the public realm is intended as an opportunity for environmental education.

While not a public realm plan per se, the *Bassett Creek Wetland Park* (Minneapolis, Minnesota), seeks to turn "ecological facts into a redevelopment vision in the historical flood plain of Bassett Creek." It recognises environmental considerations as a top consideration and works to develop key features of the environment into public educational and recreational amenities.

Creating a Community Parkway is a similar project to the *Bassett Creek Wetland Park* project in that is not part of a larger public realm plan but does involve the planning of public amenities. In this case, the *Humboldt Greenway* is referred to as a public amenity with ecological benefits which is an economic stimuli to neighbourhood redevelopment.

Engaging the Public

Few North American Cities have their own urban design studio. One of these, Charleston, South Carolina's Civic Design Center, is active in engaging the public in the planning of the public realm. While the Civic Design Center's approach is not comprehensive in scope, it does seem rather unique. Initiatives are formed largely on an experiential basis. The sidewalk café ordinance, for example, stems from a desire for a specific activity—eating outdoors while observing and being part of streetlife—and from there works towards developing policy and design recommendations for the city. This approach seems to be, at least in appearance, more capable of involving the human element and programming possibilities of the public realm than plans which are largely focused on the physical aspects of the public realm.

The Civic Design Center is housed in a storefront-type environment where public workshops alternate with art exhibits of urban design and public realm precedents from other cities. This allows for the possibility of day-to-day engagement with the public and for the public's ongoing participation in the shaping of the public realm.