

What the Suburbs Can Teach the City

by Juliet Whelan

How do our public spaces serve young teenagers? I'm talking about 13-to-16-year-olds, that horrid and awkward pre-driving age -- too old for the playground, too young to party. Like all of us, they want to socialize and have a good time. I found myself among them the other night when I left Philly for the wilds of Ardmore and dined in the grassy central court of Ardmore's Suburban Square development.



Figure 1) At Suburban Square, artificial grass provides a durable and ever-welcoming surface for teenage rough-housing. (Mahan Rykiel Associates)

We had drinks outside at one restaurant and walked a few steps to another for our outdoor meal. The court was energized by bands of young folk mingling, wrestling, grouping and regrouping, playing and carousing; we were basically dining in the midst of a teenage party. At one point I looked up and saw two of them crouching on a nearby railing like friendly gargoyles.

For those of you not familiar with Suburban Square, it is one of the earliest suburban outdoor malls in the United States. It opened in 1928 and has been going strong ever since, recently expanding to incorporate apartment housing.



Figure 2) Suburban Square in the 1930s. (Mahan Rykiel Associates)

As an early teen, I regularly haunted an indoor mall and felt a sense of independence there. Although indoor malls are dying I imagine many young people still frequent them to find some autonomy. But I think Suburban Square does a better job.

From my vantage at dinner that evening, the outdoor mall is ideal for kids--getting them outside and into the fresh air near

some (highly pruned) nature and providing space away from the stores for interaction and physical play.

Like an indoor mall, Suburban Square is a safe place away from cars with calm older adults around to provide sanity.

Does Philly have any comparable spaces? Sure, we have non-profit after-school programs and basketball courts in parks -- but the after-school programs have limited hours and basketball courts don't welcome non-male non-athletes. Both boys and girls are welcome at Suburban Square.

Our city should do more for young teenagers. Spruce Street Harbor Park and Penn's Landing serve teens, although they have irregular hours and are severed from the city by the highway. South Street is too dominated by big kids who are involved in big kid activities. For a public space to serve young teens it needs reliable weekly access, a big enough and safe enough outdoor area, adult presence, and no hard partying older teens.

Could we kit out a few of our parks to attract adults and younger folk while keeping away the older teens? Food and drink and a comfortable place to sit would attract the middle aged (like me). Green space and word-of-mouth would attract young teens. European parks often successfully host activities for all ages: a mixture of haute cuisine, soccer, chess, music.

I'd support making public spaces in the city that worked in the same way. My suburban dining experience was elevated by sharing it with some goofy young gargoyles.

Coda

I recently learned that Suburban Square's central plaza had begun as a road with angled parking and was converted to a pedestrian court in the 1970's. Adjustments were made in 2012, and the greener, pedestrian-only court was created in 2020.



It's tough to get the mix right! From my cursory analysis, the most recent iteration (the work of Mahan Rykiel Associates of Baltimore) succeeds due to its generous provision of

furniture and space for outdoor dining, lounging, and child rough-housing.

As we all know, many big cities are now reworking streets to serve pedestrians at the expense of cars. However, Philadelphia struggles to make significant strides in this domain. We can do better. A few years ago, I worked with neighborhood and business groups to redesign the central median on Bainbridge Street between Third and Fifth Streets.



Figure 4) Bainbridge Street reimagined. (Jibe Design 2018)



Figure 5) Bainbridge Street greenway. (Jibe Design 2018)

As was necessary, we bowed to political pressure and parking enthusiasts and proposed only gentle impositions on the roadway— removing angled parking and replacing it with parallel parking in order to expand the central median. We scrounged a bit more parking along the removed turn-arounds for a total loss of only a handful of spaces. Our design is politically viable. But how much grander and safer the

park would be if we could eliminate the unnecessary south-side roadway and extend the park to the southern sidewalk!

The architect **Juliet Whelan** is the founder and owner of Jibe Design. The mall that she frequented as a teen is Barton Creek Square in Austin, Texas. She welcomes comments at attention@jibedesign.net