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MAKING PLACES *August 2005*



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Five of the World's Most Overrated Places

Superstar architecture makes a big bang, but forgets that public places are for people.

By Fred Kent

Since this edition of *Making Places* is dedicated to highlighting great public spaces, I think it's appropriate to also single out places that are receiving so much undeserved praise. These are famous examples of contemporary architecture that have been proclaimed as masterpieces, yet fail miserably as public spaces. They are icons for architecture buffs to admire, not places for people to actually use. While often breathtaking as objects, they are overrated as places. It's important that we call attention to the fact that these places aren't all they're cracked up to be, because they have received so much favorable attention as the prototypes of 21st Century design. That's alarming in light of the fact that they represent a huge step backwards in how we should be designing our civic and commercial spaces. We must set our standards for public space as high as possible--and we should always speak up when a place fails to meet those standards.



Monumental blank walls create a dead zone around the Guggenheim Bilbao.

1. Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain

Let's start with the [Guggenheim Bilbao](#), an overrated place if ever there was one. Frank Gehry's signature design has garnered more critical acclaim than any project in recent memory, yet it displays a shocking disregard for

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Even the best public spaces require constant vigilance. If not, they may lose the qualities that made them great in the first place.

the accumulated knowledge and research about how people use public space. Visitors encounter blank walls and sterile plazas all around the periphery--a dead zone that leaves the potential of the riverfront site mostly unfulfilled. While there's no denying the boost in tourism spurred by the museum's now-famous form, the Guggenheim could have brought so much more than an influx of cash to Bilbao. It could have boosted public life and created a socially vibrant counterpart to the richly textured downtown core. Instead the museum is an island, removed from the city around it.

If people demand better, then some of the
Overrated Places profiled here may one day
achieve greatness through good management
and thoughtful design refinements.

2. Quadracci Pavilion, Milwaukee Art Museum & 3. Seattle Public Library

The "Bilbao Effect", in which a city garners international attention for a showy architectural project, has become pervasive, with many mid-size cities splurging on high-profile architects in the hopes of attracting more tourists. For the millions they spend, cities get a stunning artistic objects but little in the way of long-term improvement to their public realm. In the U.S., the two prime examples of the Bilbao Effect—the Quadracci Pavilion of the Milwaukee Art Museum and the new Seattle Public Library—definitely qualify as Overrated Places. The plazas of the Quadracci Pavilion are incredibly sterile, surrounded by roads wide enough to be highways. And the Seattle Library, [as we wrote in this newsletter last year](#), fails to engage people at sidewalk level, presenting incredibly dull facades to the downtown streets that surround it.



The front plazas of the Quadracci Pavilion are surrounded by roads designed for automobile capacities that match highway levels.

4. Millennium Park, Chicago

Already, the buzz for these overrated buildings is fading, and many arbiters of urban trends predict that the Bilbao Effect will soon peter out... to be succeeded, they say, by the "Millennium Park Effect." The Architectural Review called Chicago's new Millennium Park "an ambitious fusion of art, architecture, and landscape," but this new addition to downtown has simply

expanded the current obsession with high design to include parks.



Millennium Park's monuments are isolated among lifeless areas with little to do, like this plaza space facing the Art Institute of Chicago.

While it is exciting to see parks recognized as essential to the well-being of people and cities, so far Millennium Park belongs in the pantheon of Overrated Places. Like a Hollywood blockbuster, the park is okay as quick entertainment but doesn't provide a rich experience. Its attractions, including the enormous Cloud Gate sculpture and Frank Gehry's Pritzker Pavilion, seem to have been plopped down with little regard to the space in between. There is spectacle to behold, but not the variety of experience necessary for a truly great public space.

We should never allow the narrow agenda of
big projects to trump the broad need for places
where people feel engaged, safe, and
comfortable.

5. Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, Philadelphia

Then you have the places that garner undue praise not for eye-catching design, but for purported economic benefits. Philadelphia's recently completed **Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts** was hailed as a cornerstone of urban revitalization. In fact, neighboring Broad Street was proceeding just fine without the boxy, insular Kimmel Center, which interrupts an engaging pedestrian environment with its prominent loading docks and vehicle access. The building was seemingly designed so that patrons can be easily shuttled to and fro without setting foot on neighborhood streets. That kind of thinking is typical of the misguided faith behind most big projects. It produces anti-urban albatrosses like the Kimmel Center, which weigh down potentially viable districts by squashing the small-scale economic exchange that is the lifeblood of city neighborhoods.



The Kimmel Center interrupts an otherwise engaging pedestrian experience.

We should never allow the narrow agenda of big projects to trump the broader need for places where people feel engaged, safe, and comfortable, nor should we settle for the flash of spectacle when we can have the substance of design that supports human use. If people demand better--if we make it clear that we do still care about the quality of public space--then some of the Overrated Places profiled here, such as Millennium Park, may one day achieve greatness through good management and thoughtful design refinements. The unglamorous truth is that it takes ongoing care and adjustments--not a single stroke of genius--to cultivate and maintain great public spaces.

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