

What if we built **Midland** around **Places?**



A Placemaking Strategy for Building a Great City

A Report Prepared for:
The City of Midland
The Midland Area Community Foundation
and Dow Chemical Company

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700 Broadway
New York, NY 10003
T (212) 620-5660
F (212) 620-3821
www.pps.org



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INTRODUCTION	5
THE BENEFITS OF PLACE	6
WHAT MAKES A PLACE GREAT?	7
SIX PRINCIPLES FOR MAKING MIDLAND A GREAT CITY	8
MIDLAND NEEDS PLACES	9
THE POWER OF TEN: CREATING A VISION FOR DOWNTOWN AND BEYOND	11
IMPLEMENTING PLACEMAKING IN MIDLAND	29
CONCLUSION	31

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Introduction

In early 2006, the city of Midland, Michigan, the Midland Community Foundation and the Dow Chemical Company invited Project for Public Spaces (PPS) to train a group of city leadership and help identify opportunities and priorities for public space improvements in Midland. The program was envisioned as the start of an integrated campaign that involved high-level training and targeted placemaking exercises.

From April 5 to 7, PPS initiated the first phase with a series of meetings and workshops mainly focused on introducing key Midland stakeholders to the concept and practice of placemaking and demonstrating the workshop technique that could be used in later phases on actual public space improvement projects. Around 60 people participated in the training and another 150 came to an evening public lecture and discussion.

We compliment the local team for putting together our very successful April visit. This success is due also to the openness, creativity and sincere dedication of all of the training participants with whom we were lucky enough to work.

Project for Public Spaces is a non-profit corporation that has worked in more than 1500 communities in North America and abroad to improve public spaces so they are more active, usable, and attractive destinations. PPS has become widely known for its innova-

tive approach to community revitalization that focuses on revitalizing places through the collaborative visioning of community members. In our 30 years of experience, the same theme has come up repeatedly, especially in the last few years: More and more people are feeling a loss of community and a lack of control over, and connection to, the changes taking place in their public environments.

Midland enjoys a dedicated citizenry and extremely devoted and talented leadership. So far, however, Midland's residents' energy has not yet been fully captured or showcased in the public spaces of the city. A Placemaking approach is particularly well suited to bring out the best of what Midland has to offer. This report describes what such an approach could achieve.



Playing the Place Game during the Training Course

The Benefits of Place

Placemaking is often the most effective way of helping communities rise above isolated issues to forge a more compelling, integrated vision. Focusing on creating great places is perhaps the best way to create great communities.



- **Places nurture and define community identity** through greater community organization, a better sense of dedication and volunteerism, perpetuation of integrity and values, and a common vision.
- **Places benefit cities economically** by encouraging small-scale entrepreneurship, local ownership, more desirable jobs, higher real estate values, and greater tax revenue.
- **Places promote a greater sense of comfort** because they are visually pleasing, generally stimulating, environmentally friendly, and promote a sense of belonging.



- **Places draw a diverse population**, including more women, elderly, and children, as well as a greater ethnic and cultural mix, by supporting a wider range of activities and uses, new service, retail, and customer niches, and encouraging people to get involved and take pride in the area.
- **Places create improved accessibility**, being more walkable, safer for pedestrians, compatible with public transit, less reliant on cars and parking, more efficient in terms of time and money, and offering better connections between uses.
- **Places foster frequent and meaningful contact** through improved sociability, cultural exposure and interaction, exchange and preservation of information, wisdom, and values, reduction of race and class barriers, and

What Makes a Place Great?



In studying how public spaces are used, PPS has distilled the qualities that make up a great place into the following four basic ingredients:

Activities and Uses

A good place should be full of homegrown activities that act as the glue of their communities, drawing people to them for companionship and relaxation. Examples might be a farmers' market, a playground, a corner bar, or a sidewalk café. A healthy variety of such uses will attract a variety of people and keep a neighborhood lively at all times of day.

Access and Linkages

A good place is visible and easy to get to. People need to see that there is something to do and that others have been enticed to enter. Conversely, if the street is too dangerous for older people and children to cross, the place won't be used.

Linkages are opportunities to connect different elements so that they create a people-friendly environment that encourages strangers to talk to other strangers as if they knew each other. For example, if a children's reading room in a library is located so that it is next to a playground and a food kiosk is added, more activity will occur than if these facilities were located separately.

On the micro-level, if a bench, a wastebasket and a telephone are placed separately, with no connection to each other, each may receive very limited use, or even be abused. However, when they are arranged together along with other amenities such as a coffee cart or newsstand, they will naturally bring people together.

Comfort and Image

Good places entice people through well-designed amenities, such as seating, shade trees, bike racks, and bulletin boards, and also through good management that keeps sidewalks clean, paint from peeling, and neighborhoods safe. Good details can tantalize – they signal that someone took the time and energy to design amenities that are welcoming and respond to the unique needs of neighborhood people.



Sociability

A sociable place is one where people want to go to observe the passing scene, meet friends, and interact with a wide range of people that are different from themselves. Farmers' markets are a typical example of a sociable place, and research shows that people have four and a half times more social interactions in a public market versus a supermarket. Sociability is achieved by working together with the unique, local assets that can be found in all communities, and then combining the above ingredients to make a great place.

As more and more Placemaking projects are implemented, more is being learned about what works and what obstacles need to be overcome. The input of those who use and experience a place on a regular basis is essential to the process. Moreover, to address these broader "quality of life" goals, government agencies and communities must work together with an open mind, pool resources, and share responsibility for implementation.

Thus, Midland's future hinges upon calling into service all of its strengths, local merchants, property owners, developers, town officials and engineers, schools and hospitals, and the nonprofit community, to fulfill its enormous potential to become a thriving center that serves local residents and the region.



Six principles for making Midland a Great City

1. Connect Midland's great destinations with walkable and bikeable streets
2. Scale back the importance of the car and design streets for community outcomes
 - Stop designing for speed;
 - Reduce the predominance of parking (increase the distance that people are willing to walk to their destination from their car);
 - Reduce vehicle trips
3. Begin a program of experiments
 - Markets, events, temporary amenities uses, street design changes, etc.
4. Engage all residents in visioning and implementation
 - Participation from children, teenagers, the elderly and minorities should be actively sought out.
5. Define Midland by its amenities
 - Midland's identity and character should be reflected in its seating, art, flowers, churches, parks, etc.
6. Make this a community health and well-being campaign
 - Making Midland a walkable community will improve the activity and health of residents, as well as their happiness and overall well-being.

Midland needs places

Midland is a small city that is known for its great quality of life, its vast network of public parks and its strong sense of community. But while most indicators point to it as a great place to live, its downtown lacks a strong identity and could offer more to its residents in terms of active places and destinations.

The city's many assets – whether its public market, community theater, horticultural garden, or Main Street – mainly stand as separate facilities, with inadequate connections between them and accessible almost exclusively by car. The vast investment these assets and development represent unfortunately does not add up to a “Great” downtown. The challenge and opportunity now is to grow, activate and pull together these institutions.

Developing the capacity to actively manage these spaces will be key to their success, as will the ability of different sectors of city government to collaborate in retrofitting the buildings roads and open spaces.

With a population of 42,000, and approximately 100,000 more in the tri-city area, there is an enormous unmet potential for a livelier downtown Midland with more places for people to go. The purpose of this Placemaking project is to look at the “ground floor” of the city – streets,

sidewalks, parks, buildings and other public spaces – and discover how it can invite greater interaction between people and foster a healthier, more social and more economically viable environment. Downtown's public spaces should support and bring out the best of Midland's institutions and private developments, and should make all of these a part of something larger. It is this something larger that is the vision that each part of the city can help build and conform to – indeed it is this something larger that is what makes cities great.

Achieving a healthy balance of activities and users is fundamental to creating a competitive economy: recent research by Richard Florida at Carnegie Mellon University has been widely published for its potential implications on future planning decisions. It notes that the best predictor for a city's competitiveness is its ability to attract a “creative class” (professional-technical people, entrepreneurs, entertainers, scientists, musicians, artists, cultural producers, etc.), and that to attract this class a city needs to nurture a diverse and stimulating culture made up of, among other things; the arts, cafes, nightlife, pedestrian and bike-friendly districts and other amenities that improve the quality of life.

To thrive as a city in the future and sustain its current success, it is unique public

spaces and interesting destinations that will attract the talented, educated and creative individuals that its major corporations need. Fortunately, Midland can draw on its talented and well traveled residents to help build the great places that Midland deserves. In other words, it is Midland's people that are needed to create great places and it is these great places that will further draw and keep Midland's good people.



The Power of Ten: Creating a vision for downtown and beyond

Project for Public Spaces believes that great cities are created through great places. During our presentations, we introduced a concept we call the Power of Ten. Successful cities and towns are built around dynamic places or destinations that attract people downtown. Each of these destinations is successful because it has a diverse array of activities for people – ten things to do. It's not enough to have just one great destination in a downtown – you need a number of them (ten, for example) to create a truly lively town. And it's not enough to have one great neighborhood in a city – you need to provide people all over town with close-to-home opportunities to take pleasure in public life.

The City of Midland, to become a great city, needs to have at least ten great major destinations. Some of these destinations already exist, but can still be greatly improved, as their assets are still largely untapped. During our observations and workshops we identified many of the key places, including Main Street, the waterfront (including the Tridge and the Farmer's Market), Ashman Circle, and the cultural center. In the future, the area between the new baseball stadium and downtown could also become one of Midland's 10 Great Destinations.

According to the Power of 10 principle, each of these places needs 10 things to do there in order to become a great destination. The challenge in growing these places is coming up with the right list of activities that will attract people – more

than design or infrastructure. Those efforts should be developed after the uses have been determined, and in order to support these desired uses. Equally important is to have a management system to ensure that that these places continue to satisfy the community's expectations on an on-going basis.

What follows is an evaluation of some of Midland's most important public spaces, along with some ideas for how these places could be improved. The following evaluation and vision are based on results of the Place Game and PPS's experience working in similar locations.





A Vision for Midland



Create a Main Street that showcases and draws on the best of Midland

Successful main streets work because people go there for a variety of reasons: to walk, socialize, shop, snack, dine, see shows, attend community events, etc. Without more social destinations and excuses for people to come visit, Midland’s Main Street does not yet rise to this level.



Increase the number of destinations downtown to create a lively district “16/7.” Possible destinations include: more restaurants, more housing (or mixed-use housing), a community center, a visitors’ center, a movie theater, a public plaza possibly in front of the Ashman Hotel and municipal/county buildings. Other ideas to consider include: extending shopping hours, encouraging more commercial activity on sidewalks (cafés, sidewalk sales, etc.), allowing musicians to perform, and providing outdoor seating.

Expanding the number of destinations on Main Street can also be achieved by extending the area that people think of as downtown: to the waterfront, to the new ball park, and up Ashman Street all the way to City Hall, for example. A larger perceived downtown will attract more visitors and in the long run will encourage more downtown destinations to develop. And since downtown will be a comfortable place to walk, people will not mind parking on one end of town and walking – effectively solving any potential

parking problem downtown.

Another critical factor in determining the success of Main Streets is car traffic. Pedestrians need to feel comfortable on Main Street, and drivers need to see and respect pedestrians. Car traffic should move no faster than the speed of walking.



Main Street’s pedestrian walking area could be expanded and made more visible. Expand café seating and remove planters where necessary.

Reduce surface parking lots (redevelop the one in front of City Hall), redevelop or re-decorate suburban-style buildings to create more pedestrian-friendly environment. Redevelop the lot on Ashman with a civic plaza on the corner.



Slow down drivers coming from Jerome Street and Poseyville Road with the help of medians, gateways, or other traffic calming devices.

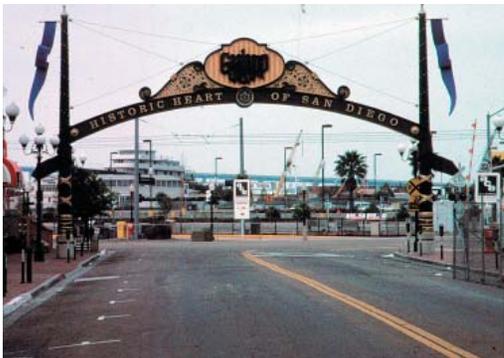
Reconfigure the Y entrance on Poseyville Road.



With its small shops, slow car traffic and many trees and benches, Main Street is a comfortable place to walk. Unfortunately, the street still feels empty at most times because there are not enough reasons to bring people downtown.



A Vision for Midland



Activate the waterfront, including the market, and connect it to downtown

There are already a lot of things to do along the waterfront: biking/walking on the rail trail, sitting on the grass admiring the view, the spray park, the farmers' market, canoeing, baseball fields, but these activities are, for the most part, isolated from each other to the extent that few people come to experience more than one at a time.

Since there are many wonderful passive or recreational parks in Midland, the waterfront park is a great opportunity for a more "urban" and active downtown park. The area around the market, in particular, has the potential for connecting the park to downtown and taking on some of the civic square functions that are currently lacking in Midland.



In the short term, combine existing uses with new uses to create destinations, program the area with more events, public art and music.

We unfortunately did not see the Farmers Market when it was open, but we hear it is a great success. Perhaps it could offer greater community benefits and draw a broader crowd for a longer period of time if it oriented outwards, offered more value-added and perhaps non-food items (such as crafts) and started to have vendors locate along Ashman Street towards Main Street. The Farmers Market area could also be used

for other types of markets at other times of the year (Christmas market, for example).



The riverfront park could include many more activities and destinations:

- Food vendors – formal cafés/restaurants as well as ice cream/hotdog carts
- Restaurant and patio behind the hotel, looking onto the park
- Boat rental
- Stage for plays / concerts / movies
- A swimming pool
- A changing room / bathroom with the spray park so people can stay downtown (instead of racing home to change)
- Other types of markets
- Winter activities (ice skating rink, Christmas market, etc.)
- View into Daily News building
- Reorient the buildings on Main Street or build new ones that face the park (with plazas, retail, etc.)

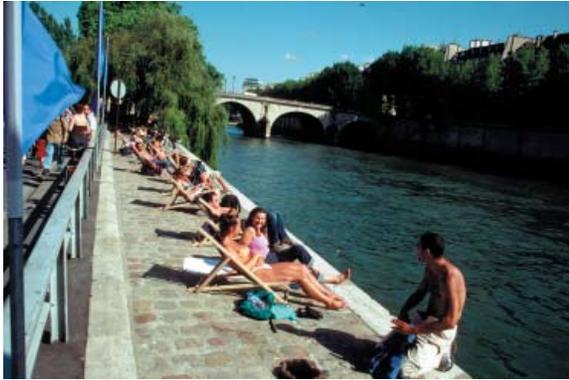
Lastly, all of these areas could be better connected, so that they feel like a whole.



The riverfront park is one of Midland's greatest assets but it is underused. A greater variety of programs would attract more visitors at different times of the day, week and year.



A Vision for Midland



Other ideas include:



Name and market the area as a whole so people think of “Tittabawassee River Park” (for example) as including a riverfront, a market, a water feature and a rail-trail.



Move parking to the side, and instead, create a more welcoming pedestrian entrance to the park. Perhaps have temporary or small scale retail for local crafts people and artists along Ashman Road.



Partner with the performing arts center for programming, utilizing their event management skills. Arts center partnered programming could include highlighting and advertising for events, selling tickets, and hosting art fairs.



Connect to Main Street so one flows naturally to the other (with signage and activity – formal retail or even temporary: market vendors could have stands on McDonald and Ashman, for example). Create many entrances to the park / Main Street (Ashman Street, McDonald Street, Rodd Street, Gordon Street, even Fitzhugh Street).



Entrances to the park are currently much more inviting to cars than to people.

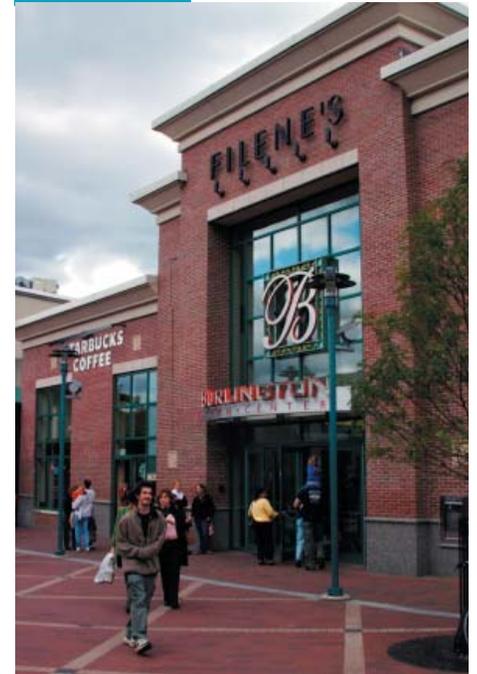


Trade the locations of the jail and courthouse with the movie theater out at the mall.





A Vision for Midland



Transform Saginaw Road into Midland’s grand boulevard

Today, Saginaw Road seems to be the service road of Midland – but it could be its Grand Boulevard. Speed does not need to be a priority for designing roads in a city where everything is within a 15-minute drive. Without sacrificing much capacity and perhaps slowing normal speeds by 10 miles per hour, Saginaw Road could become an attractive amenity for the city. It could also draw a new mix of retail and services, particularly some of the tenants currently located at the Mall.

 Parking lots could be moved to the backs of buildings and shared for compatible uses.

 Much the street edge is curb cut. These cuts could be consolidated to have single entrances to multiple destinations. This would create a more pedestrian-friendly environment, reduce turning conflicts, and save space for new development. The consolidation of curb cuts would also reduce the need for a central turning lane, creating space for a median at sections. This median could feature some of the public art that is now hidden in other parts of the city.

 New development could be encouraged to build to the pedestrian right of way or to a side access road with on-street parallel or angle parking.



Saginaw Road could be Midland’s Great Boulevard.



A Vision for Midland



Recreate Ashman Circle as a great destination

Ashman Circle is inherently a focal point for all of Midland. It is a historic area. The diversity of retailers is a major opportunity, but there's a lot of dead space and empty buildings. Traffic is heavy, fast, and it moves through without stopping.

Before looking at what is possible from a traffic perspective, any improvement effort should look first at the potential of Ashman Circle as a destination and opportunity for a creative rethinking that might include additional uses, new mixed use development. The traffic engineering can certainly be designed to support any vision that emerges.



Increase the number of things to do in the circle. Provide a range of retail, residential and/or office development as well as community gathering places.



Enhance the walking connections out from Ashman Circle – make it “reach out like an octopus” to adjacent neighborhoods.



Slow down traffic and create a pedestrian-friendly environment. Re-create the circle, reduce the number of lanes on Ashman Circle, Saginaw Road and/or Rodd Streets. Without drastically affecting capacity, it is likely possible to bring back the circle configuration with

narrow lanes, and a strong pedestrian orientation.



Make the circle more intimate, provide amenities at a pedestrian scale (crosswalks, lighting, etc.).



Now that Ashman Circle is configured to move traffic as quickly as possible, it is no longer a great destination in Midland.



A Vision for Midland



Turn the cultural center into the great destination that it deserves to be

The three cultural institutions here – each a major regional destination in its own right: the library, Dow Gardens and the Center for the Arts – are disconnected from each other physically (not even a crosswalk!) and in terms of the activities they provide. If the different institutions talked together, coordinated their events, moved some activity outside and created a great public space between them (instead of their parking lot), they could all benefit.

Both the Center for the Arts and the Library hide their great success on the outside. The activities and uses inside are literally hidden by the designs of the buildings. Both have cafes that could be brought outside with moveable seating. The Center for the arts has a gift shop, museum and ticket office that have no presence, even though they are located on the corner.



Allowing each of these three institutions to spill out onto a plaza that showcases art and people connecting with art and each other can create one of the most important destinations in Midland and greatly support the use of these three destinations.



The Garden entrance house would make a great pre-theater restaurant. The area around the entrance should showcase more of what the

garden is about and a sculpture garden could connect people to the other institutions better. The blank walls of the Center for the Arts could become more engaging, with murals, temporary banners or other types of art.



The library, Dow Gardens and the Performing Arts Center are major regional destinations, and great assets for the City of Midland. However, the sea of parking in between these three institutions revent them from living up to their full potential.



A Vision for Midland



Use the new baseball stadium to catalyze the growth of East Downtown

A stadium can be a curse or a blessing. It can be a black hole of energy (and money!), or it can be a way of livening up a whole district. Midland has already made the good – and potentially difficult – decision of not placing all the parking directly outside the stadium, but to depend on existing parking spaces downtown.

Midland should take the opportunity of the new stadium to create a whole new mixed-use district – perhaps one that is particularly attractive to the 20- and 30-somethings that the city is trying to keep from leaving. Residential, restaurants, bars, grocery store, etc.



Link to the existing fabric of Midland via a walkable Main Street and Ellsworth Street, as well as to the residential neighborhood to the north-east.



Create a waterfront destination on the other side of the bridge, where the best views of the river are, that will draw people from downtown under the bridge and from the stadium, towards downtown.



Turn the overpass into a gateway to and from downtown Midland / East Downtown. This is partly about improving the aesthetics of the overpass, and partly about giving residents

and visitors a sense of where they are and where they are going.



Make the plaza in front of the stadium a destination in itself, even at times when there is no ballgame. Provide desired amenities, including lighting, signage, benches, games, a cafe or food cart, landscaping and/or artwork.



Thanks to its amazing location – just east of downtown and right along the river – the area of the new ballpark has the potential to become a whole new thriving neighborhood, “East Downtown.”



A Vision for Midland



Midland's other great destinations

There are many more potential great destinations in Midland. Other destination opportunities discussed include: Plymouth Park, Northwood University, the history museum, churches, schools, the community center, City Hall. (And even though there is currently no transit in Midland, it is possible to imagine bus stops becoming small but important gathering places for the community.)

All of these places are strong assets that can serve as catalysts to reinvigorate the larger area around them.



Midland's community center makes no use of the public spaces outside of it.



The rail-trail is a popular recreational facility in the park. Could it be extended onto Midland's city streets?



Implementing Placemaking in Midland

During a facilitated “Obstacles & Next Steps” discussion with key city stakeholders, we identified several critical issues in implementing a Placemaking vision for Midland:



Don't lose momentum

Start this week. Spread the word to neighbors, friends, churches, co-workers, etc. Organize neighborhood “meetings-in-a-box.” Start many projects at once.



Form Placemaking management teams at key destinations

These teams could include individuals from several municipal departments, nearby residents and business owners, and developers with all members contributing funds, skills and time.



Train the larger community in Placemaking

Get more people on board by explaining to them what Placemaking can do for Midland.



Reevaluate the principles pursued in the Master Plan

Let placemaking visions inform the master plan and don't let the master plan get in the way of Placemaking. Change can happen immediately and the Master plan, inspired by placemaking visioning and can apply this vision city-wide.



Overcome the potential obstacle of government structure and regulations

The community should continue to be highly involved in Midland's planning efforts. Involve placemaking workshop participants to keep the placemaking agenda in play.



Work with a broad partnership

A wide range of stakeholders should be involved in the process, each with their own responsibilities. The broader the partnership, the higher the level of community buy-in, and the better the product will be in the end. No one entity should dominate the planning process.

A small grants program may be a good way to encourage smaller groups of stakeholders to participate in the process.

Remember PPS's eleven principles

1. The community is the expert
2. You are creating a place not just a design
3. You can't do it alone
4. They always say it can't be done
5. You can see a lot just by observing
6. Develop a vision
7. Form supports function
8. Triangulate
9. Start with the petunias - experiment
10. Money is not the issue
11. You are never finished





Conclusion

The City of Midland does not yet fully reflect the great people who live there. But that is ripe for change. It is certainly promising that Midland’s leadership is so ready to move into action.

Placemaking is ideal for Midland, where so much capital/physical investment has been made, especially over the last 30 years. It is now necessary to grow this infrastructure through placemaking by focusing on managing the places, and bringing the physical investment (whether parks, streets, trails, public institutions, or other open spaces) up to its highest possible use. Many of the Placemaking improvements will focus on low cost improvements, management efforts and even potentially self-financing initiatives.

We are very excited for the potential of the City of Midland and its many creative and passionate civic leaders. This city seems poised to take on a Placemaking agenda. Will PPS is more than willing to continue to work to facilitate, inform and inspire great places, in the end, it is up to the talented people of Midland.



