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Liman Summer Fellowship Final Report

This report has been approved for public distribution by Fred Kent, President, Project for Public Spaces.

As a 2009 Arthur Liman Public Interest Summer Fellow, I was fortunate to secure a fellowship placement at Project for Public Spaces (PPS). PPS is a Manhattan-based nonprofit group focused on helping communities create public spaces that are useful, flexible, and enhance livability and social ties. Drawing from the work of urban thinkers like William H. Whyte and Jane Jacobs, PPS has developed a set of “placemaking” tools to help community stakeholders and policymakers think critically and creatively about how to create vibrant public spaces.

My fellowship work with PPS was fairly unstructured, which was a great asset to me; I had the opportunity to work on several projects in different subject areas, and also got to collaborate with a number of PPS staff members. I assisted with marketing and web communications projects, site work, and a number of other tasks; I had the opportunity to “flex my attorney muscles” by reviewing some partnership agreements between PPS and some of its international collaborators, and by tracking down legal documents relevant to PPS projects.

I also assisted with a project, funded by the Federal Transit Administration, focused on developing tools to involve underserved communities in public transit planning. In connection with this project, I twice went to Bedford-Stuyvesant with other staff members to survey residents about their local bus and subway hubs, and discuss how to transform the barren, poorly maintained areas around the stops into vibrant

public spaces. That was an enlightening and enjoyable project, and one that gave me some excellent “on the ground” experience.

I also had the opportunity to do a substantial amount of writing for PPS on issues of interest to me. I helped maintain PPS’s “Making Places” blog and social networking sites, and posted regularly on innovative grassroots and public-private partnerships, connections between technology and place, and ways in which effective design and management of urban space can operate hand-in-hand with (or sometimes even more effectively than) law in furthering social goals. These are all issues that are at the center of my graduate research, so it was gratifying to have the opportunity to write about them so freely.

One particularly memorable and rewarding project was my participation in the development of a new PPS initiative involving courthouse architecture. Over the last century, American court spaces have become increasingly segregated and lifeless, and no longer serve as the centers of community life that they once did. Though PPS had previously done quite a bit of project work involving courthouses and other civic institutions, Fred Kent (the group’s president) asked me to write a white paper focused on recapturing courts’ former role as community cornerstones. In doing so, I was able to engage with a wide variety of perspectives, including those of architects, social scientists, and legal academics – Judith Resnik, director of the Liman Fellowship program, was particularly helpful and generous with her time. The piece I wrote will be circulated to PPS contacts and will hopefully provide a foundation for further collaborative work on this issue, including an interdisciplinary forum focused on

placemaking and court architecture. I hope to continue to be involved with PPS's work on this initiative.

My work with Project for Public Spaces this summer was very valuable as I embark on my second year of graduate study in sociology. I had the opportunity to engage with numerous issues and perspectives that will be instrumental as I begin to formulate a research agenda for my dissertation. I am truly appreciative of the resources that the Liman Fellowship (and Prof. Resnik in particular) gave me; I had a really educational and rewarding fellowship experience.