

Why Seattle's Fremont Neighborhood is the Center of the Universe

By Kimberley Player

[Fremont](#) is one of Seattle's most vibrant neighborhoods, boasting an enviable popularity with residents, tourists and businesses. It's abuzz with the kind of economic development-generating activity that other communities try to plan for, all the while retaining a uniquely organic feel. What is it about Fremont that makes it so appealing? What magical combination of elements has come together to create this thriving little Puget Sound enclave?



As those in the field of [Placemaking](#) know, successful destinations are the result of a common thread of ingredients; in this case, the most relevant include:

Strong brand. While few people know that Fremont's namesake is a city in Nebraska, virtually everyone familiar with the Seattle area thinks of Fremont as the region's creative, artsy, and slightly quirky hub of cool. It's diverse, it's liberal, and it's definitely got a sense of humor as seen in the "Welcome to Fremont, Center of the Universe. Please set your watch back 5 minutes" sign that greets folks entering via the Fremont Bridge. Talk about the creation of a great - or at least interesting - first impression!

Critical mass. Fremont is home to a dense cluster of retail stores, restaurants, bars and other businesses within an easy 3-4 block walk. Most importantly, almost all are unique local businesses vs. chains that could be found anywhere (we'll forgive the Starbucks as this is Seattle, after all). Corporations looking to recruit talent in an increasingly competitive employment environment are also taking note of Fremont's popularity with young residents. Adobe Systems and Google have offices in Fremont and many other high tech firms are considering Fremont locations. Not to mention fueling additional retail demand.

Gathering places and sidewalk cafes. Blessed with a picturesque setting on the Lake Washington Ship Canal, which connects Seattle's lakes to Puget Sound, Fremont is designed around public spaces and outdoor areas (given the climate, Seattleites are a remarkably waterproof demographic). The [Fremont Canal Park](#) and adjacent [Burke Gilman Trail](#) front the waterway. Additionally, numerous patios, decks and other al fresco dining areas help bring the streets to life.

Activities, art and entertainment. Perhaps best known for its annual [Solstice](#) event and accompanying naked bicycling parade, Fremont also hosts numerous festivals, farmers' markets and an outdoor film series. Engaging examples of public art are everywhere, ranging from a statue of Lenin from Slovakia, a 1950 cold war-era rocket fuselage, and a troll clutching a real Volkswagen Beetle in his hand. Yes, the troll really does live under a bridge.



Planning and partnerships. While much of Fremont’s growth has been organic, careful planning and collaboration have been critical components of its success. In addition to comprehensive zoning, permitting, design and public approval processes, partnerships have played a key role. One example is the alliance between the City and the Fremont Cultural Arts Council, which teamed up to provide an [interactive online map](#) with a virtual tour of more than 40 pieces of art located throughout the area.

In summary, Fremont is as much a state-of-mind as it is a physical place, defined by its layout and buildings. To its credit, the community has managed to retain a distinctive character in spite of an obvious appeal to real estate developers. With up-zoning, redevelopment and inevitable cost increases becoming prevalent in similar creative centers, one has to wonder if gentrification will impact this mecca of funky-ness. Look for further exploration of this topic in an upcoming blog, “Gentrification: Is Ballard Better or just Bigger?”