
Downtown Community Plaza
An Approach to Gainesville's Civic Square

December 15, 2008



The Issue

- Downtown Community Plaza has great potential to function as a successful, well-used public place
 - Plaza shares many characteristics with some of the world's best public squares
 - Easy accessibility by transit, automobile, bicycle, and foot traffic
 - Central location in the heart of Downtown
 - Proximity to a mixture of high-traffic uses
 - Excellent functionality during programmed events (Farmer's Market, Friday night concert series)
- Despite these characteristics, the Plaza is typically not utilized by the community; the space is often empty
- Overall perception of the Plaza is generally unfavorable
- WHY?



Strategy

- Through an on-going process, CRA will examine the Plaza in order to understand the factors that contribute to the success (or lack thereof) of this public space
- People are social creatures, and will utilize public spaces – disuse indicates a problem with the space
 - What makes a healthy (or unhealthy) public space?
 - How does this apply to the Plaza?
 - Must understand what has gone wrong and what is going well; why the Plaza currently functions as it does
 - Must understand how we wish the Plaza to function as a civic space
 - What activities do we want to see?
 - What activities do we not want to see?
 - Must achieve this understanding prior to any discussion of future plans/amenities/fixtures/uses for the space
 - Future improvements should support the vision for the Plaza, design elements encourage desired activities



Strategy

- “Project approach” is inappropriate for Plaza improvements
 - To truly achieve positive, lasting change, the strategy must be place-driven
 - Ultimate goal is to create a good urban space that serves a purpose, not to create a design
 - Previous project-driven approaches have resulted in insertion/deletion of numerous events/design elements over time
 - None of these succeeded in solving the underlying problems with the Plaza’s functionality as a public space



Strategy

- Preliminary findings: DRAB has reviewed the Plaza's history, previous planning efforts/projects aimed to improve the space
- DRAB next examined models, examples from similar spaces around the country and the world
 - Gain understanding of the common elements central to lively, well-used public spaces, as well as those elements shared by dysfunctional spaces
 - Plazas function differently than other public spaces such as parks, greenways, recreation areas, gardens, etc
 - Utilized examples of other plazas to determine elements that contribute to healthy plazas, and elements that contribute to disuse
- On Dec. 17th, DRAB will apply this knowledge specifically to the Plaza – what elements contribute to the Plaza's success? What contributes to dysfunction?



Issues to consider – What makes a healthy public place?

- Even if they cannot verbalize their feelings, people intuitively understand the spaces they use, and how they feel informs what they do
 - How people feel is described by intangibles:
 - Safe, fun, charming, welcoming, etc.
 - These can be measured via
 - Accessibility
 - Easy to get to, easy to circulate
 - High visibility vs. visually inaccessible places
 - Good, open entrances
 - Activities
 - The reasons people come to a space
 - When there is nothing to do, a place will be empty/unused – this is typically a sign that something is wrong
 - Regular events
 - Constant programs, food service, etc
 - Comfort
 - Having places to sit, choice of where to sit
 - Perceptions about safety, cleanliness
 - Scale of adjacent buildings; adjacent blank walls or dead edges
 - Sociability
 - People can see friends, greet neighbors
 - Feel comfortable interacting with strangers
 - Diverse user groups
 - Gathering points, or lack thereof



















Lessons learned

What makes a healthy public place?

- **Activities**
 - Place feels “fun”
 - Café/food service or other continuous programming
 - Regular scheduling of events
 - Amenities designed to invite activity
- **Accessibility**
 - Easy to get to
 - Easy to circulate within
 - High visibility throughout the site
- **Comfort**
 - Variety of types of seating
 - Choice of places to sit
 - Safety
 - Cleanliness
- **Sociability**
 - Constant energy
 - Variety of patrons
 - Presence of gathering points
 - Can see friends and neighbors
 - Are comfortable interacting with strangers

What makes an unhealthy public place?

- **Nothing to do**
 - Lack of activities or amenities that provide a reason to visit
 - Place devoid of visitors
- **“Closed off” spaces**
 - Disjointed flow through the space
 - Entrances visually/physically close off surroundings from the interior
 - Inability to view into/out of the site from adjacent surroundings
- **Unwelcoming**
 - Scale of adjacent buildings not people-oriented
 - Dead edges/“back turned” on the plaza
 - Nowhere to sit
 - Perception/lack of safety or cleanliness
- **Impersonal/Unfriendly**
 - Lack of features/focal points to gather around
 - Homogenous user groups (Lack of women, lack of age diversity)
 - Discomfort interacting with other users



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- At future meetings we will:
 - Apply these fundamental lessons about public spaces to our Plaza
 - Determine how we wish the Plaza to function as a civic space
 - Identify desired activities at the Plaza; how will the community use the space?
 - Formulate a mission/statement of goals & character for the Plaza
 - Identify future improvements that will encourage desired activities/vision for the space
 - Begin use-related planning to provide the amenities necessary to support those desired activities



•Recommendation: Receive update from Staff

