

For Contract Magazine

## Civic Plazas, Civic Pride

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Central city plazas are a key part of civic identity, and their role is evolving even today as cities, large and small, grapple with change. Why is it that some cities get it right, and some don't?

The fundamental role of the civic center dates to the origins of cities themselves, and it is no less important today. Consider the great plazas that immediately identify a city such as Piazza San Marco of Venice, the Spanish Steps in Rome, Trafalgar Square in London, Red Square in Moscow, and Union Square in San Francisco.

One need only look at news headlines to find that a city's identity is indelibly linked to these central, iconic gathering places. The Mall in Washington DC not only is the "Main Street" address for U.S. museums and government buildings but is arguably the nation's podium and meeting place as evidenced by events such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, the AIDS Quilt and countless others.

Times of civic stress are also borne out in civic plazas. Beijing's Tiananmen Square, the seat of power for dynastic rulers who built modern China, is now also memorialized across the world via the pro-Democracy protests of 1989.

As cities seek to maintain or expand their influence – or avoid being eclipsed -- the central plaza plays a crucial role.

City leaders and planners must consider several key elements in creating successful city squares, or risk seeing a grand scheme become an abandoned eyesore.

-- **Simplicity** is the number-one issue for successful plazas. The opportunity to remake a main plaza is a rare once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in modern cities. Local leaders and their designers often become entangled in the gravity of it all or may fall into a trap of trying to design a plaza like the ones they've seen – large fountains such as the Trevi in Rome, or statues and grand structures evoking the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

Most city-plazas are gathering places that need to accommodate annual events and civic rituals, from 4<sup>th</sup> of July parades and swearing-ins, to daily lunch-goers and casual visitors.

In San Antonio, one of the south's oldest cities, Main Plaza has been a gathering place for generations but had fallen victim to decades of disuse and overdesign. The city is now putting

finishing touches on a remake which accomplishes some simple but elegant objectives. The reborn plaza has more open spaces for large gatherings, yet has dramatic fountains for non-event days. These invisible, nearly-flat fountains are incorporated into walkable areas of the plaza, but can be turned on to provide playful pools or dramatic cascades, depending on the situation.

Another key for San Antonio Main Plaza is its interplay with surrounding uses and daily park-goers. Informal entrances create an inviting, walkable approach that welcomes people to stroll in, and there are many spaces for people to sit for a conversation, enjoy their lunch, or read historical placards of the city's rich past.

-- **Maintenance and safety** are another critical design element. A city's plazas must be accessible for maintenance vehicles and police, who are often on foot, bicycle or even horseback. Landscaping is important for creating green space and offering a respite from the urban core, but plantings must be carefully sited to avoid creating hiding places for miscreants.

The construction materials themselves are a key issue of maintenance. Some cities find that the short-cuts to save money upfront end up costing much more down the road when repair and replacement bills start coming in. Budgeting and fundraising to afford well-crafted, enduring materials requires patience and a long view. Civic plazas should be considered "forever" spaces -- cultural centers that become part of the DNA of a city.

-- **Civic plazas must also be economic engines**, which is often the most surprising and overlooked cornerstone of good design. Landscape architects and urban designers must work closely with city leaders to help maximize the city-center's potential as a source of revenue generation. Why?

Plazas serve the city and enhance civic pride when they are highly utilized, which harkens to their original role as the place of commerce. Today, especially in the U.S., central plazas are purpose-driven places, drawing people in and creating a sense of activity and excitement. These can range from small cafes for people to enjoy coffee or lunch such as in San Francisco, rental services such as paddleboats in Manhattan's Central Park, or special-event fees for sanctioned events, large and small. Revenue creates cash flow to maintain public plazas, relieving cash-strapped city coffers.

Yet the city square's role as an economic engine is most clearly evidenced in its surroundings. Plazas that link closely to city identity make nearby neighborhoods highly sought-after, whether for high-rise headquarters and retail centers or active residential zones. In Manhattan, among the most expensive real estate – residential or commercial – is linked to its proximity to Central Park.

In China, civic centers are a city's very center of gravity, as well as commerce.

One of the most interesting and enduring examples of city-center rebirth is in Hangzhou, a regional capital in Southwest China. Its city-center remake has won numerous awards, including the Urban Land Institute's first global award of excellence.

Hangzhou Hubin is the city's center, and adjoins West Lake, which has been the city's point of local and national identity for centuries. The Chinese consider it one of the most beautiful spots in the nation, and draws millions of visitors each year. Over time, Hangzhou's growth had turned the waterfront into a fairly inhospitable urban zone, dominated by a major 4-lane thoroughfare. In a project completed in 2003, the city transformed several kilometers of waterfront into pedestrian-friendly parks and plazas for daily enjoyment. The city wanted to maintain commercial vitality, but enhance access so the new waterfront functions seamlessly as mixed-purpose spaces accommodating vehicular and pedestrian access. Dong-Po Plaza, named for an early Chinese poet, attracts throngs of people who can walk easily from nearby business, hotel and residential districts. One element of the solution was to divert the 4-lane road through a tunnel beneath West Lake, which enables the city to maintain commerce but provides several hectares of space for tree-lined walks, grassy areas and plazas. A focal point for Dong-Po Plaza is a new fountain within West Lake that attracts and entertains thousands at each showing.

World-wide, in cities large and small, civic plazas that are rich with activity, simple in design, timeless in their materials and memorable in experience and attraction will endure over the generations to create cultural focal points that define and galvanize communities.

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