

Creating Quality Public Spaces

Why are Quality Public Spaces Important to Great Communities?

Great Communities are filled with quality public spaces such as public parks, pocket parks, wider sidewalks, plazas, town squares, pathways, greenways, bikeways and walkways. Public spaces are part of any new development, whether it is a sidewalk and parking spaces lining the front of a building or a public square at the center of a transit village. There is always an opportunity to improve the public aspects of a proposed development project.

Good public spaces can improve neighborhood safety by attracting people to stroll, relax and gather in areas that would otherwise sit empty. Without careful attention to design these spaces they can become a nuisance, attracting trash, graffiti or crime. Good public spaces can improve community health by encouraging and providing walkways where people previously drove past or avoided all together. Most importantly, these are spaces where all segments of society can meet as equals and are encouraged to exist together as a community.

How to Design Quality Public Spaces

FOCUS ACTIVITY IN AND AROUND PUBLIC SPACES

Human beings are social creatures, and nothing attracts people like other people. “People-friendly” common spaces welcome the public through designs that encourage pedestrians to walk through or linger in a place. Pedestrians like spaces that are visually interesting and that allow for discovery.



Quality public spaces like Concord's Todos Santos Plaza are lively and well-used.



People enjoying out-door dining create activity and enhance safety for others using public spaces nearby.

RESPECT YOUR NEIGHBORS

New buildings, especially in existing communities, should reflect the neighboring structures and spaces. Builders should show how a new building fits in with the existing neighborhood fabric. New public spaces, and the buildings around them, should enhance one another and fit seamlessly into a greater whole.

MINIMIZE CONFLICTS BETWEEN ACTIVE AND PASSIVE USES

Park planners distinguish between “active” and “passive” uses of parks. The same distinction holds true for other public spaces as well. Noisy, social activities like ball games or restaurants don't belong next to areas for nature walks. Active uses should be clustered near transportation connections and small retail shops, which tend to succeed when located close to places that attract people. Mediate conflicts between active and passive uses with landscaping or structural elements such as seat walls, interpretive signs or fences.

Quality Public Spaces include:

- farmer's markets
- community gardens
- greenways
- pocket parks
- wide sidewalks
- courtyards
- sculpture gardens
- dog parks



Orinda's Theater Square has an attractive fountain with moveable tables and seats



Community gathering for Shakespeare in the park on the community green in Windsor, Sonoma County.

ENSURE DESIGN RECOGNIZES LOCAL CLIMATE AND WEATHER VARIATIONS

As public spaces are mostly outdoors, their designs need to accommodate the local weather. In cold places such as San Francisco, access to warming sunlight is a key factor in design. In warmer parts of the Bay Area such as San Jose and eastern Contra Costa and Alameda Counties, places planted with shade trees would conversely attract people, especially during the peak of summer. There are also places that fluctuate between hot and cold, so these spaces must be designed with options for both shade and sunshine throughout the year.

PRIORITIZE SAFETY FACTORS

Comfort includes perceptions about safety, cleanliness, and the availability of places to sit. The importance of giving people the choice to sit where they want is generally underestimated. Visibility from adjacent activity is key.

KEEP SCALE IN MIND

Designs that work for highways are not appropriate for local streets, and designs that work for large regional parks do not work in neighborhood parks. Places designed with attention to “human scale” appeal to walkers, because of the shorter, more convenient distances between buildings. Large buildings with huge walls should be broken up with ornamental or design details near eye level. As with large buildings, undifferentiated open spaces can feel intimidating, empty and unsafe when crowds are absent. These spaces usually require trees or public art or sculptures to break them up.

HIDE THE DIRTY WORK

Garbage pick-up and parking garage entries are not the intended focus of public spaces, so why place them in plain view? Service drives should be on the side or rear of buildings. Shared green spaces should not be restricted to leftover areas (like floodplains) after developments have been planned; public spaces should be the first asset sketched on a site design and should be the focal point of any new development.

CREATE CONNECTIONS

Never miss an opportunity to make a walk shorter or to create new green spaces. Paths should be direct, whether between major attractions downtown or between homes and shops in a neighborhood. People are more likely to walk if the destination is within walking distance, 1/4 to 1/2 mile away. Whenever possible, streets and walkways in new developments should tie into older developments, neighborhood focal points should be reinforced and barriers between areas should be removed.



Broadway Plaza is a shopping center near the Walnut Creek BART station with park-like public space filled with seating and shade trees for refuge during hot summers.

Quality Public Spaces have:

- benches
- shade/shelters & sun spots
- trees and landscaping
- water fountains
- lighting
- public art
- signs for directions and destinations
- trash cans and public restrooms
- activities located adjacent to parks (i.e. vendors, shops, community centers or libraries)