

The Power of Public Plazas

The 13 ingredients for a perfect plaza



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INTRODUCTION

The investment in a public, programmed plaza is one of the best ways to attract private development to a downtown. The DDI team researched more than 100 public gathering areas to find out their costs, and what the result of the project was. We also uncovered the 13 ingredients that should be part of any plaza development project. They are shown here in order of importance.

North America is slowly moving to the European standard: We are eating and shopping later and later into the evening hours; we want out of our cars so we can enjoy a pedestrian-friendly, walkable downtown; and we want “Third Places”: places to hang out where there is lots of activity – particularly during the evening hours. Even public and farmers markets are moving to the evening hours.





Ingredient #1: Location is Important

You plaza should be in the “heart” of your downtown. Not out on the outskirts. It is your hub and everything will emanate from around it for several blocks. It can be an alleyway closed off to make a plaza, or a street closed to vehicular traffic (but ONLY when it’s so busy it just makes sense). It can be a corner lot, but most commonly, plazas are developed where existing parking lots currently are. Yes, there is always local consternation about the loss of parking, but we surveyed dozens of plazas that were developed in parking areas, and in every case, the loss of parking was not an issue. In fact, plazas are actually worth a walk of a block or two.

CASE HISTORY:

Market Square in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

- Population: 307,500
- Date developed: Planning started in 2006, opened in 2010
- Cost to develop: \$5 million to “dig the place up and start over”
- Size: Plaza is 28,800 sq. ft./2,676 sq. m.
- Prior use: Old park with vehicle access, “drug central”
- Funding: City & state: \$3.75 million, local fundraising \$1.25 million
- Annual operating budget: \$100,000

Notes: Totally revitalized downtown Pittsburgh

- Tested outdoor dining for two years, first. It worked!
- There are 12 restaurants and 6 on the way
- 14 buildings around the square redid facades
- Businesses increased hours, robust evenings
- Pedestrian traffic increased by 116%
- Spurred \$1.2 billion in private investment & 2,000 new jobs
- “After four tries they finally got it right” – local merchant





Ingredient #2: Turn your downtown parks into plaza

If you already have downtown parks, convert them to activity spaces, not just pretty places. Remove lawn areas and replace them with paver stones and decorative surfaces (no asphalt, please) that can accommodate vendor booths, artisans, tables and chairs, entertainment, etc. You'll save a fortune on maintenance, and the plaza becomes a year round usable space.

The ideal plaza size is one acre (45,000 square feet, or 4,180 square meters). They can be effective if they are as small as 1,000 square feet or as large as five acres, but the ideal size is typically an acre to an acre and a half. If you're in a larger city, consider developing additional neighborhood plaza areas. Plazas are meant to be intimate gathering spaces. Nearly every piazza in Italy ranges from about 35,000 square feet to two acres.

CASE HISTORY: Oxnard, California

- Population: 200,000
- Date developed: A concept

The three buildings you see on the left in the photo (above) would be removed to make room for a year round public market. The park across the street would be converted to a plaza center (top right and right) with an amphitheater, stage area, a drop-down water feature with flush-mounted fountains that could be shut off to host art shows and other exhibitions. The upper right area would remain a lawn area with a veterans memorial, already there.

Turning parks into plazas make them less expensive to maintain, and make them much more usable for dining, seating, for entertainment and vendors. Even if nothing is going on, just the steps to the amphitheater or fountain create seating areas.





Ingredient #3: All successful plazas are programmed

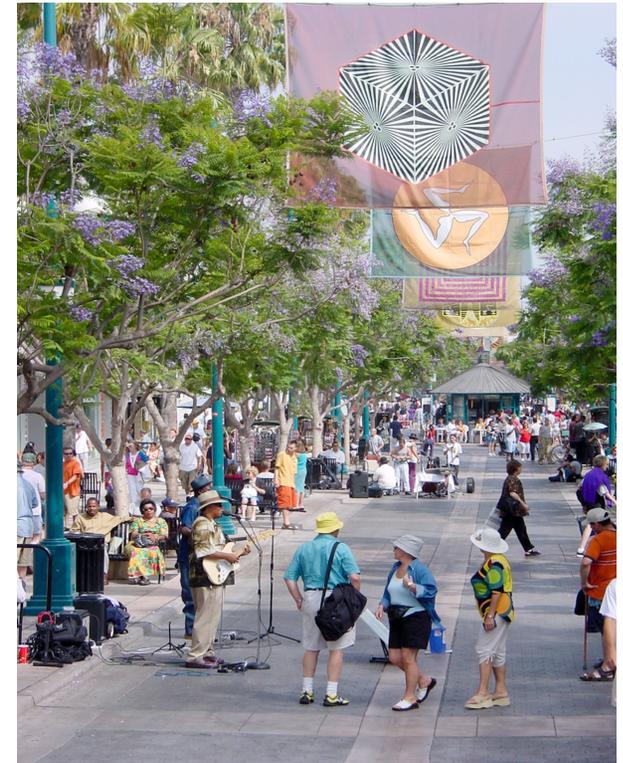
Programming a plaza does not necessarily mean organizing big events, although they are important. Programming means making sure there is always “something going on” in the plaza. This can include buskers (street musicians, artisans, performers), weekly or daily public market events, vendors (food, art, local crafts), concerts, music, dance or live theater. Plazas can host quilt guild shows, arts markets, pottery guilds, classic car and motorcycle shows, chainsaw and ice carvers, a Christmas tree forest, “Yoga on the Square” each morning or evening, and even “Pics on the Bricks” – movies shown on a large screen in the plaza. Keeping it programmed is the number one priority for any plaza and that means you may need to have a person (or two or three) dedicated to keeping it an active center of the city or town.

CASE HISTORY: Third Street Promenade Santa Monica, California

- Population: 90,000
- Date developed: Designed in the 70s, opened in 1989
- Approximate cost: \$3 million (1989 dollars)

Top Center: Bronson Park - Kalamazoo, MI

Top Right: Main Street Square - Rapid City, SD





Ingredient #4: It must be a year round activity center

This means it needs to be home to activities all 12 months of the year, and at least 15 days of each month – not just weekends. This keeps the plaza from becoming a hangout for undesirable activity. The big trend now is creating ice skating rinks in the winter months. You can use real ice, or in some locales where that's not going to work, you can now rent or purchase synthetic ice. Interactive water features are a popular way to create an "activity center" without having actual entertainment or events taking place. But make sure you have, at the very least, 15 days a month of activity at the plaza. If you have an interactive water feature, piped in music, skating during the winter, there's no reason why you can't end up with a plaza people will gravitate to 365 days of the year. Just change the focus by season.

CASE HISTORY: Main Street Square Rapid City, South Dakota

- Population: 70,000
- Date developed: Opened October 2011
- Cost to develop: \$8 million (could be done for \$5 million without the granite structures)
- Funding sources: \$4.5 million from philanthropy and \$3.5 million from the city.
- Ongoing maintenance and programming: \$500,000 a year paid through a business improvement district levy and lots of sponsors and partners.
- Prior use: A parking lot



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Ingredient #5: Add music and lighting (the latter 24 hours a day)

It doesn't have to be live music, although that's always preferable. In one place we worked they had undesirable activity taking place during the night. With piped in music they started playing classical music and the activity instantly disappeared. Music creates ambiance and sets the mood of the plaza. Lighting is absolutely critical. You can now get incredible LED lighting that can change color depending on the event, time of day, or ambiance, which is very energy efficient, and can have light bulbs that will last for more than 30,000 hours. Keeping the plaza lit 24 hours a day is extremely important. Simply turn down the intensity levels during the evening hours.

CASE HISTORY: 16th Street Mall Denver, Colorado

- Population: 620,000 (in the city)
- Date developed: Started in 1974, opened in 1982
- Cost to develop: \$76.1 million including shuttles
- Size: 1.25 miles long (16 blocks)
- Prior use: The major thoroughfare through downtown
- Funding sources: 80% from local funds, the remainder from local taxes.
- Management: Downtown Denver (Business Improvement District)

Notes: Always evolving

83,000 people a day spend time on the mall

Nearly a dozen artistically painted upright pianos are placed throughout the mall, "Your Keys To The City."

The mall is well lit 24 hours a day and is active every day of the year.



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Ingredient #6: Public restrooms are a must

Your plaza is a public gathering spot. That means you want people to hang out, spending hours on the square. Your plaza should be ringed with restaurants, cafés, or food vendors, and wherever you serve food or drink, restrooms (washrooms for our Canadian friends) are important. Make sure they are multi-stall facilities. In some of the communities we surveyed that had independent private lockable restrooms, it created a private space for illegal activity. They should also be heated. Porta-potties do not count! You can always add these for large-scale events, but spend the money to have permanent, year round restroom facilities.

Top Left: Caras Park in Missoula, MT. Word to the wise: Heat your restrooms!

Top Center: Rapid City's Main Street Square. Restrooms are located in the bottom level of the parking structure, facing the square.

Top Right: Pioneer Courthouse square in Portland, OR. Restrooms are in the Visitors Center.

Lower Right: Market Square in Pittsburgh, PA. If your plaza attracts people for more than two hours, public restrooms are a must.





Ingredient #7: Provide ample vendor space

Plazas are economic development tools used to spur private development around them, and to create spending places for local residents and visitors. You want to encourage local vendors: food, artisans, music, and crafts. These will change by event or time of year, but are critical to the success of any plaza area. The vendor space can be used for additional tables and chairs when there are fewer vendors, food trucks, entertainment, or even shows: artisans in action, entertainment, etc.

CASE HISTORY: Caras Park Missoula, Montana

- Population: 67,000
- Date developed: 1980s (summer theater on the lawn)
- Approximate cost: Done in phases. The large tent was \$600,000.
- Size: Pavilion is 9,000 square feet, the park is about 20,000 square feet.
- The pavilion tent was paid for with \$280,000 in Tax Increment Financing funds, the remainder from fundraising efforts.
- Prior use: Unused grassy area
- Management: Missoula Downtown Association programs it. The city owns it and maintains it.

Next up: A three-phase project to create better weather protection, replace the pavilion cover. They recently covered the amphitheater seating area.

Hosts more than 500,000 people a year and more than 40 annual events.





Ingredient #8: Beautification is essential

Without beautification a plaza is just another concrete jungle with no soul. Every plaza should include trees (preferably deciduous. They create shade, a lighting platform, and a welcoming feeling), raised planters, large potted plants (and trees), and borders for annual color. Most of the beautification should include evergreen shrubs and plantings, enhanced with perennials and seasonal color. There is no one that doesn't like hanging out in a beautifully landscaped place, and plazas are no exception.

CASE HISTORY: Pearl Street Mall Boulder, Colorado

- Population: 100,000
- Date developed: Opened in 1977
- Cost: \$1.8 million in 1977 dollars
- Size: Four blocks
- Prior use: The primary thoroughfare through town
- Funding sources: Assessment district paid two-thirds. Other third came from Federal grants.
- Management: City owns it, Parks Dept. maintains it, Downtown Management of the city programs it.
- Annual budget: \$295,000. Business Improvement District spends an additional \$40,000. Funded from parking revenues.

Notes: One of Colorado's most popular attractions
15,000 tulips imported from Holland every year
Public restrooms, staffed visitor information, ambassadors
80 programmed events a year plus daily buskers year round
One of America's best retail plaza areas





Ingredient #9: Close to or part of a public market

Plazas and public markets should be joined at the hip. If you have a pop-up market (once a week for several hours), your plaza is the perfect location. Better yet, build a permanent year-round public market and set it next to your plaza and you will end up with a downtown that's vibrant, and an attraction in itself. This way the plaza never competes with the market – they both enhance each other.

CASE HISTORY: Market Square Fallbrook, California

- Population: 30,500
- Date developed: 1993
- Size: 6,000 square feet
- Prior use: An empty broken up asphalt lot
- Cost: Guesstimate: \$150,000 for redevelopment
- Management: City owns and maintains it
- Notes: Home to the Fallbrook public market





Ingredient #10: Make sure you include water

Water is the number one draw for people in the world. It can be as simple as a fountain where we can hear the running water, or it can be a splash-pad (flush mounted fountains that can be turned off when the space is occupied for other uses). Water features will be the most expensive item in your plaza, and cost the most to maintain, but create “activity days” just by being there. Kids can play in the water during the summer months, and having seating areas around the water make it a desirable place to talk, visit, eat, and spend time. Do NOT skimp because of price. Most cities bemoan the initial cost, but we haven’t found a single plaza that would get rid of it. In fact, most would expand it if they could. The more interactive it is, the better. Having ice in the winter, by the way, is part of having water in the plaza. It doesn’t always have to be running water.

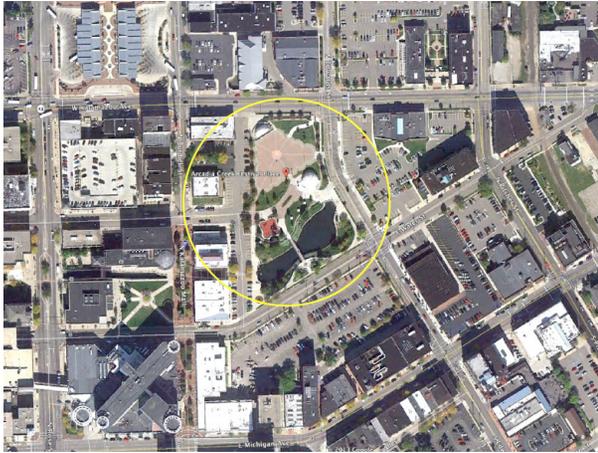
CASE HISTORY: Campus Martius Park Detroit, Michigan

- Population: 706,500 (in the city)
- Date developed: Opened in November 2004
- Cost: \$20 million
- Size: 1.6 acres (6,475 square meters)
- Prior use: A “concrete island” downtown eyesore
- Funding sources: Detroit Conservancy: \$8 million, Ford Motor Company: \$8 million, City of Detroit: \$4 million
- Management: Owned by the city, managed by Detroit 300 Conservancy (a local non-profit organization)

Notes: Was previously overwhelmed by heavy vehicular traffic
Hosts more than 200 events (250 event days) a year
1,500 Paris style chairs (free moving) and in 8 years not one has been stolen.
Hosts more than a million people a year, including 500,000 ice skaters during the winter months.
Basis for more than \$500 million in new private-sector development projects.



Top Left: Navy Pier - Chicago, IL



Ingredient #11: Include a permanent stage

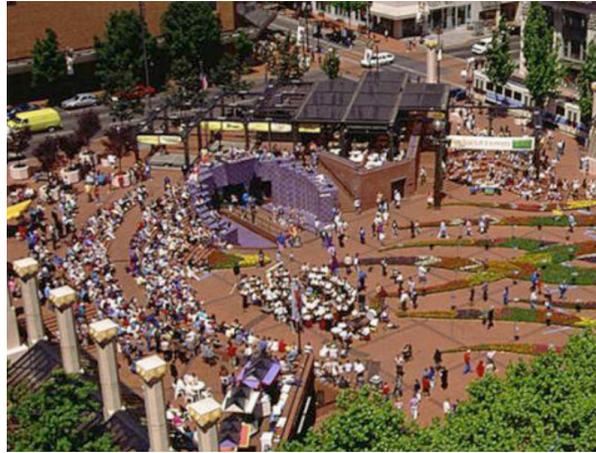
Entertainment is a key part of any plaza, be it music, dance or theater. This includes proper lighting, power, and a roof – a permanent stage. It doesn't have to be huge, it can be round, it can be square or rectangle. But it should be raised (typically 3' from the ground) and should be at least 400 square feet (37 square meters) in size. Lighting and accommodation for sound should be built into the stage area. Make sure there is access to the stage by vehicle since many stage props and sound systems are heavy. A 20' x 50' stage (1,000 square feet/93 square meters) can accommodate marching bands, performances other than music, and larger events.

CASE HISTORY: Arcadia Creek Festival Place Kalamazoo, Michigan

- Population: 75,000
- Date developed: Opened in 2004
- Cost: \$2.7 million
- Size: Approximately 2.5 acres
- Prior use: Parking lot



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Ingredient #12: Include amphitheater space

This could even be bumped up to number two on the list after location. An amphitheater means you have steps that overlook a performance area or face a stage, or surround a water feature as you see in most of the examples we've provided you. Steps are seating areas – even if nothing big is happening. You can grab lunch, or ice cream, and head to the plaza and sit on the steps to visit with friends or simply people watch. An additional benefit of a sunken amphitheater (perhaps only a few steps) is that it can accommodate interactive fountains for kids to play in and the steps surrounding it create viewing spots AND act as a “fence” without a real fence – keeping the kids confined to that space. In the winter it could be flooded and turned to a skating rink.

CASE HISTORY: Pioneer Courthouse Square Portland, Oregon

- Population: 594,000 (in the city)
- Date developed: Opened in 1994
- Cost: \$6.5 million (about \$14 million in today's dollars)
- Size: 40,000 square feet (3,716 square meters)
- Prior use: A parking garage
- Funding sources: Local community raised \$1.5 million (80,000 name bricks sold at \$15 each), federal and state grants.
- Management: Pioneer Courthouse Square, Inc. with 5 full-time and one part-time employee.
- Annual budget: \$2.3 million (in-kind donations: \$500,000, brick sales (sold 150 during 2012 holiday season at \$100 each).



Top Left: Conceptual rendering of the “perfect plaza!” Note the amphitheater area that can house a water feature, or seating for entertainment on stage.

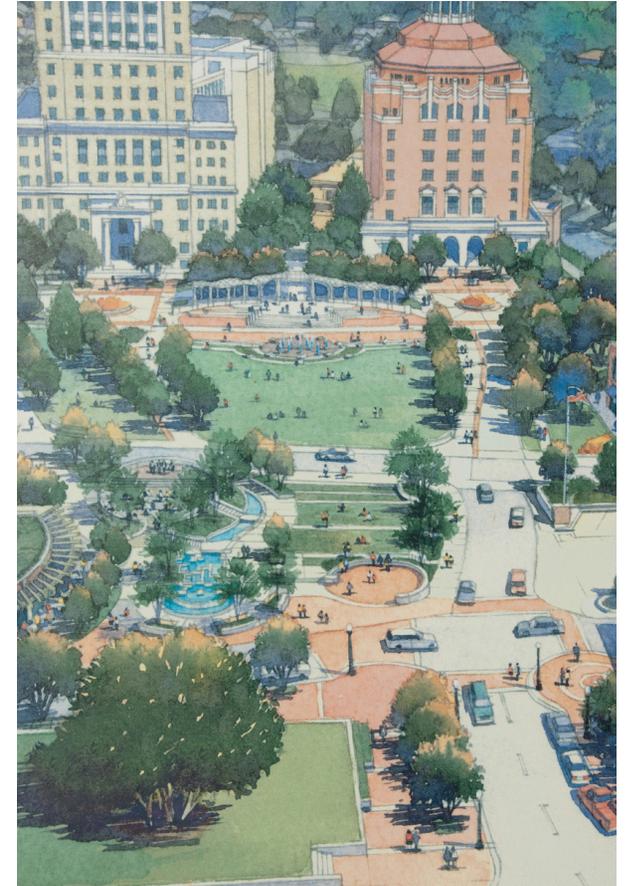
Notes: 320 programmed event days a year!

70% retention with event “clients”

6,000 visitors a day

Totally reinvented downtown. Major private investments

Word to wise: Keep investing in the infrastructure!



Ingredient #13: Multiple levels create intimate spaces within the plaza

If you've got the room, or a park that can also accommodate a plaza area, you can create numerous intimate areas within the plaza. Or if you have a sloped piece of ground, then you can create various levels, each its own plaza space. Plaza spaces should ALWAYS be level, so to accommodate slopes simply create various levels. It adds interest, can accommodate a variety of activities like historical displays or artifacts on one level, a fountain on another, a kids play area on a third, and a stage and assembly space on the fourth.

CASE HISTORY: Pack Square Park Asheville, North Carolina

- Population: 84,500
- Date developed: 2010, 2011
- Cost: \$20 million plus a \$2 million endowment
- Size: 6.5 acres

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Plazas do not necessarily need to be large. In Ashland, Oregon (population 22,000) there is a small area just outside the Chamber of Commerce office that includes a water feature and seating areas where musicians and friends often gather. The space? Just 400 square feet. If you don't have the opportunity to build the ideal sized plaza (typically an acre or 45,000 square feet), then create several smaller spaces that can accommodate a street musician (or two or three), or artisan and perhaps 20 bystanders.

Even spaces with a chess board create activity spaces.

In this example (near right), located in Shipshewana, Indiana (population 700), they took an unused alleyway and converted it into an attractive plaza area. No matter how big or small the town, plazas are a critical element to making your downtown a central gathering place. And that translates to more local spending, a sense of community, a sense of place, and will attract visitors as well as local residents.

