
HEART AND SOUL OF A CITY HEALDSBURG PLAZA: WHAT MAKES IT WORK SO WELL AS PUBLIC PLACE?

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COLUMN: Close to Home

We were taught in design classes in college that if a public space attracts people of all ages, both genders, singles, couples and groups, then the design is a resounding success.

This certainly fits the description of the historic Healdsburg Plaza.

On any given day, you can observe parents pushing babies in strollers, couples strolling hand in hand, elderly men sitting alone on benches, teen-agers hanging out in the gazebo and toddlers dipping their toes in the fountain.

It is no wonder that other Sonoma County cities are trying to create public spaces with the same attractions.

Cloverdale recently christened its new plaza.

Windsor is envisioning a town square adjacent to its new civic center, a block from the old downtown.

Sebastopol's pretty new plaza appears to suffer the effects of its location behind Main Street, but usage will certainly increase as its shade trees mature.

Rohnert Park's Community Center tries to substitute for a town square but mostly attracts those attending classes or events.

Cotati's prominent and rustic La Plaza invites lively social and political discourse, as witnessed recently in the debate over a giant grocery chain's desire to locate in that small city.

Petaluma's tiny Putnam Plaza and its adjacent Riverwalk alleyways are hip, lively and healthy public spaces.

Santa Rosa's Courthouse Square, originally configured like the plazas of Healdsburg and Sonoma, was bisected by a four-lane roadway in the 1960s and now attracts mostly a

narrow segment of the population. Discussions are under way about a plan to re-unite the halves.

All this modern effort seeks to replicate an idea that is more than a century old.

It was in 1857 that Harmon Heald laid out his new town. He used a north-south axis around a central plaza, a common vision of community design at that time.

So what is it about Healdsburg's Plaza that makes it work so well as a public place?

The plaza is centrally located at the junction of two main crosstown connectors, Healdsburg Avenue and Matheson Street. Its other two sides are enclosed by public streets as well, guaranteeing a sense of ownership as well as constant surveillance.

Besides being surrounded by public rights of way, the plaza benefits from its surrounding architecture. A public space is defined first by its edges, not by its site furnishings nor by its staged events. Just as we feel sheltered in cozy indoor rooms, the Healdsburg Plaza is a comfortably enclosed outdoor room surrounded on three sides (four would be better!) by almost continuous two-story buildings.

There are few breaks in the architecture from which to draw energy away from the center.

The design of the buildings themselves contributes to the success of the plaza. A variety of styles, materials and eras are represented.

And along with diversity, the buildings contain common elements that encourage pedestrian movement and provide psychological comfort.

In most cases, the facades of the buildings are aligned with the edge of the sidewalk. Through windows and glass doors pedestrians have close-up views of what is going on inside the buildings.

This, combined with closely spaced entrances, sustains their interest and keeps them moving around the plaza.

Awnings and colonnades on the buildings and trees on the street allow pedestrians to pause in comfort.

After visitors have seen the shops, they can turn around and go back the way they came or they can cut through the plaza. The original diagonal walkways provide a perfect shortcut.

The size of the plaza, approximately 200 feet by 250 feet, allows people to see clearly across to the other side. This provides them with a level of comfort in knowing where they are going.

In other words, there is a reason other than socializing to go through the plaza.

This, ironically, is just what encourages socializing. There is no pressure to perform. After all, you are just passing through.

Once inside the plaza, the design itself encourages people to pause.

Comfortable seating is provided both in the sun and shade. The 100-plus-year-old trees provide a perfect ``ceiling" in this outdoor room, adding to the sense of enclosure.

The central fountain, designed by University of California, Berkeley Professor Emeritus Burt Litton in 1960, combines comfortable seating with a play place for children.

Most importantly, it is a focal point for visitors. It allows them to be in a highly public place without themselves being a focus of attention.

Off to one side, a gazebo provides a gathering for teen-agers when not being used as a stage for formal events. Its small size and high visibility from all sides ensure that it is a popular and safe place for them to congregate.

Parking either encourages or discourages use of downtown spaces.

Unfortunately, in the '60s and '70s, many traditional downtowns converted their parking from diagonal spaces to parallel ones and thus severely reduced the number of spaces.

Healdsburg did not succumb to that trend.

Surrounding the plaza on three sides are diagonal parking spaces on both sides of the street. More often than not there is a space available.

But even when one isn't, there is a perception that there is ample parking because of the sheer number of spaces surrounding the plaza.

Parking is clearly not a reason to stay away, as it is in some of Sonoma County's old downtowns.

Although convenient for cars, the design of the streets around the plaza is also comfortable for pedestrians. A layer of parked cars on both sides of the street provides a buffer between the pedestrians and moving vehicles.

Besides a perceived physical safety for them as a result of this, the parked cars also provide a psychological buffer from passing onlookers. Pedestrians do not feel as if they are the ones on display.

At the intersections, where pedestrians normally would feel conspicuous and perhaps unsafe, the streets are ``necked down" to reduce the walking distance.

This necking down has been accomplished by removing a single parking space on each side of the street and replacing it with planters and an extended sidewalk. The distance a pedestrian walks is thereby reduced by more than 25 feet. This added comfort for the pedestrian encourages a healthy connection between the shops and the plaza.

Just as people feel the need to be centered, so also do the places we live need to be centered.

Village greens and public plazas provide this vital element in towns and cities.

Unlike modern shopping centers, these highly democratic, unstructured public spaces welcome all people at all times of the day. They provide a focal point for community gatherings.

These pieces of the public realm communicate the message that the public good is highly valued in a community. This is where the bonds are forged.

But the design of these public spaces is crucial to their success.

Daniel Solomon, a well-known San Francisco architect, believes that the first permanent human settlement leaves an indelible mark upon the landscape. The residents of Healdsburg are extremely fortunate that the city's visionary founders left this mark for them.

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