

# A Return to the Town Square

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**Stephanie Rouse**

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The town square was an integral city function for centuries throughout the world. It was the central hub of activity, a place for gathering to celebrate, receive information, conduct business, and to simply sit. They have changed over time, losing prominence in recent decades with attitudes changing about society and how we interact. Before technology took off and created an environment that allowed for information at your fingertips, individuals gathered in town squares to share information, discuss politics, and transact business. It has since become a barrier to genuine interaction. Most engagement today is done through social media, email, and video chats. While these forms of communication can be useful when working in a global economy, we cannot forget the value derived from speaking in person. The classic town square can be reimagined to function as it used to, to bring people together to interact face to face and create an educated and active society. We can use the town square as an inviting place that allows people to gather to celebrate, conduct business, and engage in discussion. We may not need the town square to disseminate information, but it can still give us the environment to interact face to face again. There is a way to bring back the historic town square to build on the original values in the new era of design and information.



## A Return to the Town Square by Stephanie Rouse

Most town squares in the United States are a piece of art, rather than a fully functioning space. They have been turned into a beautiful park-like atmosphere, devoid of any real purpose beyond aesthetics. In some countries, the square is an integral part of daily life for citizens like the piazzas of Italy. The most basic definition of the town square is “the principal square in a town, often centrally located and used for markets, festivals, etc.”<sup>1</sup> Few town squares in the United States function in such a manner. A better definition of what town squares should be are a public open space connected by multiple modes of transportation to all areas of the city, designed for maximum spontaneous and planned interaction among all users, providing space for information dissemination, public engagement, and debate. A long definition, but it provides all aspects that will make a town square function for the citizens it is designed to serve. To make recommendations for the future of the town square, we must first look back at the original models, analyze their current state, and use a set of criteria to judge the successes and opportunities of three case studies: The Railyard in Santa Fe, New Mexico; Times Square, New York City; and Rittenhouse Square in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. These three case studies will point the way forward in designing the next generation of town squares that respond to the people they serve and foster better civic engagement, qualities that are needed in today’s political environment.

### **A Look Back: The First Town Squares**

The first known society to value civic engagement was the Greeks. They were committed to the idea of Eudaimonia, a state of flourishing created by good fortune, health, friends, power, and material wealth. Aristotle argued pure happiness could only be achieved by thinking and behaving virtuously, creating a link between civic and personal well-being. Athenians were engaged in the advancement of the polis (city-state) by choice.

The first instance of a space created specifically for civic engagement dates to the fifth century A.D. The Greek Agora, an amphitheater constructed in the side of the Pnyx Hill, held twenty thousand citizens and was used for lively debates. The Agora functioned as the heart of the city and its citizens. It was not used by those in power to manage the people but as “an invitation to participate in the life of the polis.”<sup>2</sup> The Agora was also the center of religious and governmental buildings, home to both commerce and free thinking.



*Pnyx Hill with steps carved out for public speeches (photo courtesy of Wikipedia)*

Following Greeks, the Europeans were the next to discover the power of the town square to unite a city. The European town squares were economic hubs, home to daily markets and trade. They were designed at the heart of the city, drawing in residents from all over to do business, participate in government activity and civic engagement, and to leisurely stroll and talk to neighbors. The multi-functional square “was a uniquely

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<sup>1</sup> Town Square. (n.d.) In *English Oxford Dictionaries online*. Retrieved from [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/town\\_square](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/town_square).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Montgomery, *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 19.

European invention, intimately connected to the development of democratic and representational self-government.”<sup>3</sup> Today, social life on the European square includes spontaneous and planned meetings, democratic dialogue and civic engagement, and an environment of learning. It is home to centuries old festivals and celebrations, street entertainers, and passive people watching.<sup>4</sup>

One of the more popular European squares for both visitors and local’s is Piazza Il Campo in Siena, Italy. The piazza is sloped like a Greek amphitheater, lined with cafes and shops, anchored by Palazzo Pubblico (city hall). The Campo was created in 1194 as an unpaved marketplace. After the citizens gained power from the church in 1288, they began work on the Palazzo Pubblico which began forming the piazza as we know it today. As work progressed, brick pavers were laid in the sloping market place. In 1297 the facades of the adjacent palaces were redesigned to appear uniform and match the Palazzo Pubblico. The completed public space ushered in the new form of self-government. It played and continues to play an important role in “ensuring livability in [the] utopian vision of the city.”<sup>5</sup>

For every Piazza Il Campo, there are hundreds more historic public squares in various states of decline. Some have become such icons they are home to tourists only and no longer serve the community like a town square should. Others have been saved and still offer commerce, engagement, and social vitality to the residents nearby. Just because they thrived when they were built, does not mean they will continue to do so in today’s society. The greatest lesson from the European plaza is adaptability.

The history of the American square is derived from the traditions of the European square. Early American settlers were concerned primarily with establishing towns and making it through the harsh winters; however, as they gained a foothold in the new world, civic interaction began to spring up. The earliest town squares were informal gathering spaces located at the center of the town. Government took place out in the open where all citizens could participate. When city halls and courthouses were constructed, these activities moved inside and left behind any thought of an open-air meeting place for civic engagement.



*Public Square in Cleveland, Ohio taken in 1916 (photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)*

The City Beautiful movement spurred the creation of public parks as part of the concept to restore the city to its grandeur and beauty. Spurred by the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the City Beautiful movement spread to cities across the nation providing

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne H Crowhurst Lennard and Henry Lennard, *The Genius of the European Square* (Carmel, CA: Gondolier Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Suzanne H Crowhurst Lennard and Henry Lennard, *The Genius of the European Square* (Carmel, CA: Gondolier Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Suzanne H Crowhurst Lennard and Henry Lennard, *The Genius of the European Square* (Carmel, CA: Gondolier Press, 2007), 103.

a template for well-groomed parks to be looked at, but not to be used. Fences created barriers between the parks and the community surrounding them. They were certainly not to be used for large gatherings or meeting spaces.

The last attack on the town square was the suburbanization of America and the sprawl movement. As citizens moved out to subdivisions designed for rapid movement of vehicular traffic, the idea of the town square vanished. “The more thinly a city spreads out, the less access citizens have to one another.”<sup>6</sup> Government was relegated to the downtown, shopping and commerce to large shopping center, and the residential neighborhoods to the periphery. The town square did not have a space in the new cities. Resulting from Euclidian zoning codes, land uses did not mix, removing the ability of residents to make multifunctional trips with spontaneous encounters. With people confined to their cars, they were unable to debate local politics or share relevant news with each other.

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Square**

The condition of the American Square today is mixed. In some cities they function like a park, while others are void of all activity. Some cities have managed to create fully functioning town squares that promote the engaging and active environments found in the original Italian piazza.

The town squares that have become dead space are concrete leftovers without activity. “The space we occupy can not only determine how we feel. They can change the way we regard other people and how we treat one another.”<sup>7</sup> If a space feels unwelcoming and cold, civic engagement and conversation will be stifled. These squares lack two primary drivers of active spaces—adjacent local businesses and residences. Both need to be included for the town square to function properly. They are also located in a way that does not attract users on their way to work, school, shopping, or dining.

William Whyte, through his work on the Street Life Project in the 1970s, found public spaces were occupied when they were easy to use and comfortable. Using time lapse photography, he documented the movement and patterns of people in public spaces. He noticed in one particular square, the occupants moved with the sun, occupying areas that were outside of the shade. His research lead him to the conclusion that “social life in public spaces contributes fundamentally to the quality of life of individuals and society as a whole.”<sup>8</sup>

Whyte was hired by the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation in 1980 to evaluate and suggest improvements to Bryant Park in New York City. Created in 1934, the park had become unwelcoming to the public and overrun with drug dealers. Part of Whyte’s proposal included “lowering the park to street level, removing the obstructing hedges and fence, and adding entrances to promote pedestrian flow, increased visibility, and improved safety.”<sup>9</sup> Movable furniture was added to allow users to rearrange the space to suit their needs. Whyte knew from

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Montgomery, *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 59.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Montgomery, *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 156.

<sup>8</sup> Project for Public Spaces (<https://www.pps.org/reference/wwhyte/>; accessed 4/23/2017).

<sup>9</sup> American Planning Association (<https://www.planning.org/greatplaces/spaces/2010/bryantpark.htm>; accessed 5/29/2017).

his research that people wanted to be where they felt comfortable. His design suggestions created that environment and helped to repopulate the park which now attracts 25,000 visitors a day including local employees, students, families, and tourists.

The squares that are left over from the City Beautiful movement or created in its memory are great places to take a walk or have lunch, but do nothing to create active civic engagement or activity. They function as destinations which usually result in activity during peak hours, leaving the square void of activity during down times. Parks are often used for solitude and retreat, not as places to casually interact with strangers or happen upon friends. Causal interactions like this are found in areas with high activity created by the need to run errands or dine, not often found in the park-like squares.



*Bryant Park activated by a range of users, who move the furniture and activate the space in a way that suits their needs (photo courtesy of the American Planning Association)*

### **Three Categories for the Success Square**

There are three categories each with a set of criteria for creating successful town squares in the 21st Century. The categories were derived from research into historic European squares American squares of today, and lessons from the three case studies to follow. The categories include physical features and elements, social and active functions, and general characteristics. Including the majority of elements in each category will lead to a more successful town square. It is important to remember though, no town square will function, no matter how well designed, if it ignores the needs and desires of the citizens it is intended to serve.

#### **Physical Features**

The physical features and elements are important to consider when designing or rehabilitating a town square. Physical installations can either encourage or hinder movement and interaction among users. Something as simple as a bollard used to keep vehicles out of the space can be used as seating if designed at the right height. Another dual purpose feature is artwork that provides beauty, seating, and a place for children to play. Movable seating is also important in a town square. People need to be able to rearrange the space to suit their immediate and changing needs. They may have an intimate conversation among two or three friends or need to rearrange the space to accommodate a large group discussion. A seating arrangement that began for two might grow as friends pass by and stop on their way through.

The principles of permaculture should be studied before beginning a town square project. Permaculture designs incorporate multiple functions into one system with care given to how the functions are arranged and connect. Physical considerations are combined with social to create an holistic approach. The town square, using permaculture, can serve not only as a social, civic, and commercial space, but also help alleviate environmental issues common in urban cores.

Through careful design, water installations can be a piece of art and help convey the runoff into the appropriate channels. Landscaping should not be ignored, but concern should be given to creating a space that acts more like a park than a square. Again, strategically located planters could also serve as seating, provide shade, and habitat for bees, butterflies, and small animals.

The architecture surrounding the town square should be a mix of old and new. European squares that were constructed of entirely new architecture failed, while those that retained historic buildings thrived. New squares void of context do not have the luxury of reusing the historic urban fabric; however, they can create a similar variation among buildings through changes in design features and varying facades.

Safe design should also be incorporated into the square. At its most elementary level, dating back centuries, activating the square at all hours of the day will inherently make it safer. More eyes on the street, as Jane Jacobs promoted, will create more accountability and lessen opportunities for crime or misconduct. One way to create more eyes on the square is to place residential units above first-floor shops overlooking the space. This ensures activity throughout the day as residents come and go. Physical installations that can make an impact include good lighting and removing alcoves or areas hidden from view from the design. The American Planning Association subscribes to Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), a set of design guidelines and principles for creating safer public spaces.

Lastly, the town squares of today need to take advantage of new technology. With the advancement of broadband connections, social networking, and digital displays, cities can create a town square that capitalizes on connectivity through technology. Such installations could include a display screen that advertises upcoming public meetings and open houses, events on the square, or messages from elected officials. They could even project Twitter or Instagram feeds to show the engagement occurring throughout the city and spark discussion on the square. Many cities have message boards on streets and highways; however, drivers will retain far less information than a pedestrian on the square.



*Digital displays like this could be used to project public meetings or advertise upcoming meetings and events (photo courtesy of adi.tv)*

### **Social and Active Functions**

The physical features, if designed with input from the end users, will support social and active functions within the space. These are the "meet, talk, celebrate" activities that activate and enliven the town square.

The primary function of the first town squares was to provide a space for the exchange of goods ranging from grains and livestock to household items. Commerce on the 21st Century town square is limited to weekly farmers markets which have expanded beyond the primary function of offering fresh produce, meats and dairy to include crafts and specialty goods. In

many European countries, these markets are separated into multiple locations, with a primary product sold at each. They go beyond the exchange of goods to the exchange of ideas and information. Citizens can purchase their groceries while learning about local gossip, upcoming meetings, or government activities. With American shopping primarily performed in big box stores, we lose out on this opportunity.

Weekly markets are just one way in which spontaneous and planned encounters among friends and colleagues can occur. Large gatherings can grow from a few friends sitting at a cafe to a large group with seating spilling onto the square. Shopping on the square can increase interactions among residents. The more reasons to pass through or come to the square that are created, the more opportunity there is for spontaneous conversations to occur. They can be friendly gossip or lively political debates. The town square is the ideal space for these types of conversations. The public arena allows more passersby to join the debate and offer their view, expanding citizen engagement in local government activities.

With a square that encourages spontaneous and planned meetings, the opportunity exists to have government or town hall meetings in the open space. Too often our government meetings are restricted to stuffy council chambers, discouraging the passive participant's attendance. If the city hall is properly designed and located, doors could be opened and the activity could spill onto the square, mimicking the activities occurring at the restaurants and coffee shops. Residents on their way to get groceries or pick up dry cleaning could stop and listen or participate. Children could play nearby while parents attend.

This type of civic engagement is far more effective at empowering citizens as opposed to the standard public meeting format within city hall. People are happier if they feel involved in the decisions made on their behalf.<sup>10</sup> Opening the meeting onto the square gives them the opportunity to be involved without any additional effort. Government officials can engage in discussion where residents are already gathering. No one attends the public meetings of today because the meeting times compete with the need to run errands, look after children, have dinner, or a whole host of other reasons. In this new format, citizens can bring their children, pick up dinner, and eat while participating in the meeting, running their errands on the square afterwards.

Another form of civic engagement that can occur on the town square includes exhibits, displays, and booths. Local organizations with tables set up throughout the square can provide information and capitalize on the lively conversations. They can raise awareness for their cause as residents pass through the square on their way to and from work, running errands, and patronizing the local businesses. The town square



*An example of a peaceful rally of 200 participants in the Old Town Square in Fort Collins (photo courtesy of collegian.com)*

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Montgomery, *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).



offers a non-threatening environment for students to start engaging in their local government and forming their civic responsibility early.<sup>11</sup>

These booths can grow into peaceful protests and rallies on the square. In the U.S., citizens are becoming more involved and engaged through peaceful protests and marches. While not every town square is designed to handle a large political gathering, most types of events can be accommodated. By providing a stable and open location for holding events to raise awareness on key political issues, problems with current protests including blocking traffic and disrupting movement of people and goods can be avoided. Some states such as Minnesota are looking into legislation that would fine protesters for blocking traffic. If the town square is open to these political summits, it will alleviate the need to impose fines for being engaged in government. Some protesters have gone on private property to try to raise awareness which is not a good solution. We need civic engagement in public places where private business owners are not disadvantaged as a result.

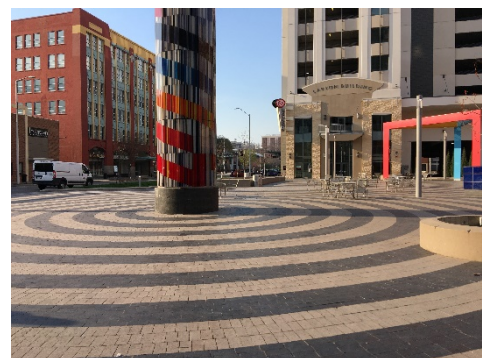
A combination of government and entertainment will activate the town square throughout the day. Performances and festivals help bring crowds to the town square to watch the activity and participate in the entertainment. The size of these festivals should be limited so as not to block everyday traffic through the square. Cultural activities will draw locals to the space, further creating opportunities for spontaneous meetings and conversations. They provide a sense of place and pride in the city by celebrating its history. Spontaneous music from one or two musicians can help to enliven the space without overpowering discussion. Bringing movies into the town square could provide a low intensity programmed activity.



*Shop Street in Galway, Ireland during the Galway International Arts Festival. While the pedestrian street was activated, pedestrians could still pass*

## Characteristics

The most successful town squares have one primary characteristic in common—they are surrounded by a diverse mix of uses. Key uses include high density housing, offices, shops, restaurants, and personal services including barber, hardware store, bakery, etc. The square should interact well with its borders, blending the transition from the square into the surrounding neighborhood and businesses. Mixed use development, just now regaining a foothold in local zoning codes, will activate the square throughout the day, drawing in employees, residents, and visitors.



*Despite being surrounded by office, residential, and restaurant uses, this square is void of all activity because it has fenced off from the adjacent restaurants.*

<sup>11</sup> Suzanne H Crowhurst Lennard and Henry Lennard, *The Genius of the European Square* (Carmel, CA: Gondolier Press, 2007).

Businesses on the square need the opportunity to openly use the space in front of their shop for displays or patio seating. This will further activate the square and promote spontaneous conversations among patrons and passers. To encourage the flow of people through the square, programs like bike-share should be located nearby. Multi-modal users arriving by bike, train, bus, or walking will create a more diverse population on the square and reduce the strain created by vehicular traffic. Cars should be prohibited from the town square and limited to the periphery.

The town square can serve as both a node and a path as identified by Kevin Lynch in his book *Image of the City*. In some instances it will also become an edge, but the goal is to create activity in the square, not next to it. A central location in a high population center encourages more users are to visit, especially if a diverse set of land uses is provided. If situated among employment centers, the square can act as a path for residents to pass through on their way to and from work. This activates the space in the morning and evening and encourages spontaneous interactions among users as they encounter friends and acquaintances on their route.

### **Case Studies**

To ground the above research, three case studies were selected—The Railyard in Santa Fe, New Mexico; Times Square in New York City; and Rittenhouse Square in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Each represents a different kind of square. The Railyard is a brand-new creation, Times Square is a new design with a historic function, and Rittenhouse Square is purely historic. The case studies show that a functioning public square can be created from vacant land or by working with an existing space.

#### **Railyard: Santa Fe, New Mexico**

The redevelopment of the Santa Fe Railyard in New Mexico did not happen overnight. It was a long process with extensive collaboration among numerous interested parties beginning in 1985 with the Mayor's proclamation to redevelop the area. The first application was submitted in 1992 by Corvallis, the development arm of the railroad, with a proposal to create a shopping mall, luxury hotels and parking structures. After rejecting the project because of steep opposition to the density proposed, the City took charge of the campaign. They purchased the property with the assistance of the Trust for Public Lands in the late 1990's with the intention of creating a highly functional public space. The community-based engagement campaign began a year later with over 6,000 residents participating. A design center was opened to the public to allow residents to provide feedback on the project when it was convenient for them. The Railyard Master Plan was refined in 2002 by the firm Design Workshop. What resulted was a pedestrian-dominated, multi-modal, environmentally friendly plan offering public gathering spaces, existing structure reuse and 360,000 square feet of new buildings.



Plaza in the Railyard (photo courtesy of SR FCC)



Map of area around the plaza (map courtesy of SR FCC)

The Railyard Stewards were organized early in the process to promote the area and provide long term maintenance of the space. To manage the large development projects, the Santa Fe Railyard Community Corporation (SR FCC), a nonprofit management organization, was formed. Today the organization provides public events and programs and management oversight for private development.

The new park, plaza, and alameda (pedestrian corridor) were designed by Ken Smith, Frederick Schwartz, and Mary Miss after winning the open design competition. The resulting space is responsive to residents, includes water wise plantings, shade structures, community gardens, a restored acequia, playground and performance lawn. There are thirteen acres of open space installed throughout and protected by a Conservation Easement. The new plaza was desperately needed to replace the existing downtown plaza, outgrown by the city. More space was needed to accommodate the visitors, events, and markets. A crowd of 20,000 people showed up to celebrate the grand opening in 2008.

The Railyard is the focus of community and social activity with the plaza at the heart. The plaza design allows for special events, temporary performances, community gatherings, and everyday activity from individual food vendors and performing artists. It is pedestrian friendly and handicapped-accessible with nearby vehicle drop off zones. The new commuter rail line from Albuquerque to Santa Fe draws a large workforce crowd through the plaza daily. The area is well connected to the trail network, providing safe and easy routes to and from the plaza for bicyclists and pedestrians.

The Railyard is a success story of the redevelopment of an underperforming industrial area to better serve the city. The new plaza is pedestrian friendly and encourages a mix of uses; however, it would have been stronger if residential buildings were mixed in with the commercial uses, or buildings included first floor commercial with residential above. The residential neighborhoods on the periphery supply users throughout the day; however, after the businesses close for the evening, the activity is lost along with security. The physical design of the space is good, with a mix of old and new buildings and compatible architectural styles and materials. Lastly, the plaza area seems to function as a destination, rather than an integral part of daily activity for residents. Users plan to go to the Railyard for events or markets and stay only until

the activity has finished. By encouraging more residential uses and personal service businesses on the plaza and within the Railyard district, the space would be used daily as part of the residents' routine (shopping, dining, relaxing, meeting friends). This would also increase spontaneous encounters and the ability of the space to be used for citizen engagement by government and nonprofit organizations.

### **Times Square: New York City, New York**

Times Square, located in the heart of New York City, has seen dramatic changes throughout its long history. The area, originally called Long Acre Square before 1904, was the hub of activity for pedestrians and horse drawn carriages, but was slowly taken over by the automobile. Broadway was cut right through the heart of the square to allow high speed vehicular traffic through, making it less than desirable for pedestrian use.



*Times Square in 1903, 1980, and 2009 showing the progression of pedestrian use, to vehicular, back to pedestrian (from left to right, photos courtesy of 570 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the Skyscraper Museum, and Michael Young)*

In February 2009, the New York City Department of Transportation converted five blocks of Broadway (from 47th to 42nd Street) from street to pedestrian plaza as a demonstration experiment called “Green Light for Midtown.” This added 60,000 square feet of space for pedestrians that pass through the area on their daily commute and tourists visiting the area. Based on the success of this temporary installation, the DOT began working with Snohetta, Design & Construction and the Times Square Alliance on a permanent design. The goal was to solve the problems of pedestrian overcrowding, competition between multiple users, and repair the streetscape that had become unpleasant.

By 2010, the percent of motorist injuries was down 63% and pedestrian injuries by 35%.<sup>12</sup> Pedestrian activity at 7th Avenue and Broadway had increased by 11%. A follow up survey of nearby users showed that 70% of theatergoers said the new plaza created a positive experience, 42% of people did more shopping in the area and 26% of employees nearby left their office for lunch more often.

The new pedestrian focus of Times Square had a positive impact on its use. Prior to the street closure, the area was crowded with tourists and residents passing through. It was not a node, but a path to get from one place to another. The reactivation of space created general civic

<sup>12</sup> Reid Ewing, “A ‘Natural Experiment’—Closing Broadway,” *Planning Magazine* (<http://www.planning.org/planning/2010/apr/research.htm>).

zones, pedestrian traffic flow zones, and activity zones. The civic zone encourages free speech and political demonstrations, while the activity zones allow for the conduction of services and monetary exchanges. The separate pedestrian zone allows for the exclusive flow of pedestrian traffic. Activity zones are located within the general civic zones which creates a mix of activity and uses. This provides the opportunity for residents and users to purchase a meal to eat while watching a presentation or informal speech in the civic zone.

One problem that resulted from the new plaza space was the increase in aggressive performers looking for tourist tips. Times Square, like many Italian piazza, is a large tourist destination. This drives away resident's from the area who want to avoid being solicited. The one way to avoid the unwanted solicitation from street performers by locals is to relocate the plaza into a local neighborhood, out of the tourist area. New York City officials are attempting to solve the issue through government regulations and penalties against the street performers.

Times Square has a unique version of 24 hour activity. It is a tourist destination and caters to visitors with bars, restaurants, and hotels, resulting in activity all hours of the day. The activity, however, is not by permanent residents and loses the accountability and security provided by residents living on the square. Visitors are less likely to interact in the square with locals or have the spontaneous encounters that residents would have.

Lastly, the architecture of Times Square is a mix of building types, styles and materials that has been built up over the years. The most prominent features are the billboards providing changing displays and rapid new content. The texture of the buildings and digital displays draws visitors to the area. This is not a style that would likely be successful in any other city, but Times Square has been home to large billboards since the early 1900s and therefore residents and visitors associate the advertising clutter with its character.

### **Rittenhouse Square: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

William Penn designed five public squares in his 1681 Plan for Philadelphia. The most popular still in use today is Rittenhouse Square located at the southwest corner of Walnut Street and 18th Street in the southwestern corner of the center city. Originally named Southwest Square during its use as an animal pasture, the name was changed in 1825 to honor astronomer-clockmaker David Rittenhouse (1732-1796). The first house facing the square was built in 1940 with the latter half of the century seeing development by wealthy Philadelphians. The park-like atmosphere was created in 1913 when architect Paul Cret was hired to transform the nondescript space into a beaux-arts square. He designed diagonal crosswalks cutting across broad stretches of grass with a circular path in the middle of the square linking them. At this time, the iron fence was installed separating the square from the adjacent street traffic.



*View looking south onto the square in 1926 (photo courtesy of Free Library of Philadelphia)*



*View looking southwest onto the square today (photo courtesy of Friends of Rittenhouse Square)*

The square was designed with four entrances and is surrounded by a music school, office towers, restaurants, and apartments. The square is accessible by multiple travel modes including bus service, a trolley line, bicyclists, pedestrians, and a high-speed rail line. During the weekday lunch hour, nearly 2,300 pedestrians pass through the space.<sup>13</sup> The adjacent housing is a mix of densities including small row homes and high-rise condominiums and apartments. Events are held throughout the year in the square, including the annual Flower Market established in 1914 and the Juried Fine Art Show established in 1932.

The square benefits from active citizen engagement that began in 1947 when residents organized the Center City Residents Association to defeat a proposal to build a parking garage underneath. Today, the new organization, Friends of Rittenhouse Square, fund two full-time employees to assist in activating the square with festivals and events, promote the area, and work with businesses and residents.

Rittenhouse is exemplary of a functioning and interactive square. It has a mix of uses, both residential and commercial to provide 24/7 activity by concerned and invested citizens. It is accessible by multiple modes of transportation and has both active and passive recreation and activities. The square benefits from centuries of adaptation and transformation, growing within an active community. One aspect of the square's history that hinders its function is the iron fence and hedges that serve as a barrier, closing the space off from the adjacent businesses and residential towers. The surrounding streets also restrict the ability of restaurants to open seating onto the square and provide opportunities for spontaneous interactions. If feasible, closing one block of an adjacent street might provide the opportunity to better link the commercial, business, and residential activity with life on the square.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

The first step in improving civic engagement through the installation or redevelopment of the town square should be to create an inventory of what exists. By mapping the locations of

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<sup>13</sup> "Rittenhouse Square: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania." *Great Places in America: Public Spaces* (<https://www.planning.org/greatplaces/spaces/2010/rittenhousesquare.htm>).

existing town squares, gaps can be identified and locations tested to serve the local populations better. A national inventory can also provide information on successes and failures of the town square, providing designers and city officials a template to apply within their own cities.

After inventorying all the existing town squares and identifying the gaps, each city should begin the public engagement process. They need to involve their citizens in planning and preparing for a new town square or rehabilitating their existing square. Residents should be involved in the beginning because they will be the users of the space. If it does not work for them, it will not work at all. Temporary pop up spaces can provide an idea of how it would function if permanently built out, like in the Times Square case study. This allows residents to provide feedback on what they see as working or needing refinement.

Another benefit of inviting citizens to participate in the planning process is gathering the cultural and historical knowledge they possess. A truly successful town square will reflect the heritage and culture of the residents it serves. What works in one city may not work in another because their values will be different. A culturally mindful square will be livelier and have a better sense of place than one that could be placed in any city as if it was designed in a vacuum.

An important consideration while designing the town square is creating a long-term maintenance plan. It is critical to identify the agency or groups responsible for maintaining the space long-term, otherwise it will likely fall into disrepair for lack of upkeep. Residents in the short-term may take it upon themselves to maintain the square, but over time as citizens come and go, proper maintenance may fall by the wayside. Most often the maintenance will fall to the city government. This would be ideal as the government will be around forever to manage the space. Their location on the square will also help them keep an eye on the activities and adjust as needed. A non-profit organization formed for the maintenance and promotion of the town square could also provide the same steady management as demonstrated in the Santa Fe Railyard.

Finally, evaluation and adjustments are needed to ensure the space is functioning as intended. By identifying the shortcomings or successful aspects, the square can be improved. It is not a static location, but a living environment that should adapt and change based on its users. Residents should feel welcome to make their own alterations or additions to make the space work better for them. City officials should make it known they welcome feedback and actively seek it out on the square. They should spend time on the town square to remain approachable by residents with concerns or praise. This kind of evaluation and adjustment will make for a more resilient town square.



*Piazza Navona in Rome is a truly successful space, with impromptu seating, rich and varied architecture, and high activity (photo courtesy of Secret Italy)*

## **Conclusion**

The successful features of the town square are easy to identify. They include sporadic, continuous use throughout the day enabled by multiple uses and activities that draw in residents.

Land use should be carefully considered surrounding the square to ensure high concentrations of activity throughout the day and night. Allowing for spontaneous interaction among residents and visitors is central to advancing democratic dialogue that enhances livability.

Knowing what it takes to create a successful town square, we can begin to design and rework spaces to encourage residents to "meet, talk, and celebrate" together. Too often this face to face interaction is overlooked for more convenient methods of computerized interaction. We need to return to the town square to bring back meaningful citizen engagement with city officials and each other. We have the space to do so. With careful planning and engagement our cities can be more responsive and empowered and harness the energy for change within the town square.