Principles of Good Plaza Design

Every successful public space must respond to:
- Its physical context – adjacent buildings and uses
- Its local climate – sun, shade, wind, rain
- Its own history
- Its users

It must include the elements that are attractive to people – activity, beauty, safety, focal points.

History, Tradition and Character
- Certain forms and patterns have appealed to humans universally over time and place, and these form traditional design.
- The form of the town square is a significant historical artifact. The pattern and interaction of multiple strong geometrical elements – squares, circles, diagonals – traditionally forms the structure and foundation for important civic spaces.
- Creating a sense of procession through different stages of a space, with visual and physical focal points, is another universal design principle.
- In an existing, historical civic space, it is important to respect the essential elements of the historical form and order while updating the elements to make them relevant to the present and future (just as their original, historical founders did at their creation).
- Design elements should inject local character and flavor – local landscape, local industry, local art and craft, both historical and contemporary.

Activity and Sociability
- Create intense use, both formal and informal.
- Offer lots of seating – some that can be in the sun, some that can be in the shade.
- Provide elements and activities that attract a varied cross-section of people – young to old, singles, families or groups.
- Provide elements and activities that give people reasons to be there at all different times – passing through, meeting up or taking a break during work or school hours, socializing or enjoying events and entertainment during off hours, evenings and weekends.
- Offer many choices for solitude or for gathering, for relaxing or for watching or participating, choices to be in the open or to be in a secluded area (to view or to be in view).

Comfort and Appearance
- Access and linkages are essential to the success of a public space. Easy and safe physical and visual access should be provided from all perimeters.
- Function and appearance are linked, but are not identical, as in a home’s living room. Therefore, to create the best whole, each detail should be measured against both function and appearance.
- Successful public spaces find opportunities to create beauty and visual interest, which in turn attract people. Construction materials should also project an image of value and durability.
- Maintenance and Operations: Even if all of the other elements of a successful public space are present, without the look and feel of safety and cleanliness, a place will fail or fall far short of its potential. The space must be well-maintained and cared-for, with a maintenance plan that is realistic and sustainable. There must be an obvious sense of continuous informal surveillance from a critical mass of users and from the surroundings, and regular law enforcement should be used to minimize anti-social behavior bold enough to continue despite this surveillance.
Design Precedents

**New Haven Green (above):**
- The village green or “commons”
- Grass and scattered trees, usually informal plantings
- Important buildings usually face it (here extreme example perhaps)

**Classic North American Town Squares (Above and Below):**
- Chico’s City Plaza shares many similarities with the central square plazas built in almost every town across Mexico for the last 500 years: multifunctional, heavily used, space - balance of “soft” and “hard”
- Typically, it is a simple square removed from the grid, with public buildings on some sides
- From above, it looks almost like a forest (from a desire for shade, the feeling of enclosure, as with a roof)
- On the ground, it looks like a plaza because of the need for abundant paving for intense use - events, ceremonies, gatherings
- In each corner is a fountain, and in the center is the bandstand

**Lake Forest, IL (Above):**
- The central square as part of the city’s original plan (Lake Forest)
- Consciously laid out, usually in a simple rectangle or square
- Embedded in a street system, usually a grid
- More often “formally” planted
- Important buildings face, often in a formal/axial way

**Bryant Park, NY (Above):**
- Lots of seating – some in sun, some in shade, located to provide choices to be in the open or to be in a secluded area (to view or to be in view)
- Intense use at all times of the year and throughout times of the day and evening
- Design for visibility from surrounding areas – feeling of safety, security and comfort
- Places for eating lunch – even purchasing and serving food

**Morelia Mexico**

**Savannah Squares (Above and Right):**
- Focal point at the center; usually a fountain of monument
- Balance of green space and decorative paving
- Elegance and dignity – a civic space of which to be proud
Chico City Plaza’s Design Setting

One of the most compelling aspects of the Chico City Plaza is the great simplicity of its design. In plan it is a perfect square with two diagonal paths linking the corners, a very small square plaza at the crossing of the paths, and a circular walk set halfway between the central plaza and the surrounding streets. Originally there was a decorative fountain in the center of the plaza. The original planting was equally simple: double rows of trees lining the diagonal paths and regularly spaced street trees along the edges. The Plaza was intended as a kind of formal centerpiece for the town – a place more to be viewed than to be used. Over the many decades since the plaza was established the only significant modifications to the design have been the removal of the central fountain and the addition of an octagonal wooden bandstand next to the central plaza.