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# TOWN SQUARES: DESIGNING THE COMMUNITY'S HEART



Future proofing new public spaces has never been so crucial, and creating a sense of place from bare paddocks requires careful design and planning. We share our best practice considerations that enable a community's heart to prosper.

It's hard to imagine when looking out over a bare paddock with only grass as far as the eye can see, that one day this may be somebody's home.

Children may be born here, grow, learn and play. This may soon develop into a thriving community where families will build their lives.

As the world's population grows, the land around us is filling up with roads, houses, hotels and concrete jungles, so there's a desperate urgency to hold onto as much green space as possible.

The heart of a community is traditionally the 'Town Square', so designing and transforming these bare paddocks into new spaces, comes with many special considerations. The number one challenge is making it work not only for now, but for many years to come, allowing for future proofing in order for the space to evolve and grow as does the community that surrounds it.

In designing Town Squares, we take inspiration and see potential from its natural surrounds, creating a public gathering space that promotes health, happiness, and well-being, where people can join together to share the experience.

These spaces need to be skilfully planned to leave a lasting impression. Creating a sense of community is achieved when these spaces become familiar places to the people using it.

We want to encourage people to leave their houses, visit these spaces and give them a reason to stay, enjoy them and make them their own. We want to create an escape away from the urban built up world, where residents can get outside, be active and breathe in the fresh air.

At i2C there are a few golden rules that we stand by when it comes to Town Square designs:

## **Built Form**

Big open spaces with lush green grass are beautiful, but in order for a space to be comfortable for people to use all year round we need to consider all of nature's gifts; the good and the bad, wind, rain and sun, on any given day.

Successful spaces are often those that are surrounded by either built form, covered seating zones or landscaping. Not only does this protect people from the weather, but it also creates a sense of intimacy, security and belonging.

The location and breakup of the built form needs to be well thought out to avoid obstructing important view lines into the space. These allow people to catch glimpses of the atmosphere and movement created by the people using it as they enter the site.

## **Size**

Many of the famous town squares around the world are of a considerable size, with multi story buildings on all four sides, hard ground surfaces and not a tree in site. Why do these work? Because of the history behind them, the buildings that surround them, and the well-deserved reputations they have gained over the many years of their existence. These attributes can't simply be recreated in a new development.

Depending on the size of the development, what we have found works best is to start small, (20m x 30m is ideal for a small centre), then working up from here to preserve its intimacy, keeping in mind the built form and landscaping.

## **Landscaping**

The main attraction of any open space is its connection with nature. As many people now live in apartments or houses with little or no yards, they want to escape to nearby surrounds with the open air, trees, grass and water - things that are living and growing. These important factors all help in creating health and happiness.



In Australia, morning sun comes from the east, midday from the north and afternoon from the west (it's simple but sometimes forgotten).

Therefore, locating the outdoor seating zones along the Southern or Eastern sides will fully maximise the hours of sun, from sunrise to sunset.

## Orientation

Know the climate of the area and take advantage of the natural sunlight. Successful outdoor spaces often revolve around the sun, therefore locate cafes, restaurants and seating zones where the sun is going to drench

the area, while still providing shade for those scorching hot months.



## Building Heights

Adding height to the built form on the southern side of the street, while keeping the height on the northern side to a minimum, avoids blocking the northern sun reaching these spaces, yet still adding protection against the wind.

## Uses

Town squares and open spaces won't always be jam packed with people, and this isn't always what makes a place successful. These spaces also need to allow for down time, somewhere that people can relax, unwind and just be outside.

The uses that surround a Town Square are predominantly reserved for cafes, bars, restaurants, fast food, fresh food, kiosks and children's playgrounds. These uses draw people in, add atmosphere and activity, and make the place come alive.

A smart way to fully utilise a space is to create a multi-purpose zone, which can be transformed for community events, bands, festivals, weekend farmers markets with local produce, pop-up shops, incubator spaces, then packed away and cleared to allow it to just be an "open space".

## Community Involvement

Without community commitment and involvement it's impossible to create a successful public destination. These are the people who will be using the space; it must be designed to reflect their vision and serve their specific needs.

Part of our role, before we begin any part of the design process, is to determine how a community wants to use a space. What we think the community needs and what they actually want may be two very different things.

Get busy with your research! Distribute questionnaires; hold meetings with the local community; determine what demographic will be using it; study the area to find out what's there, what's missing, what works and what doesn't. Involve local artists to create public art in the space, visit local properties and use the materials within the development.

Importantly get Council involved and work with them not against them. Having the local

community and Council on board will lead to a more collaborative process.

## Movement

We design to encourage slow pedestrian movement so people will stay and use the space for longer, and consider Main Streets that will slow the traffic flow in order to create a safe walkable environment.

This can be achieved through the use and location of landscaping, kerbs, pedestrian crossings, raised zones through the Main St, slow traffic speeds and alternative truck routes where possible. The more pedestrian movement and activity that is visible to drivers, the slower the traffic will flow and the more aware they will be when driving through a shared zone.

## Architectural Style

Acceptance of a space comes when it reflects the style of the community and is sympathetic to its natural surrounds. Take advantage of what's already there - the land form and



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environment, this can include water, vegetation, rocks and wildlife.

Put back into the space what you are taking out, this will achieve a space that belongs and embeds itself into its surrounds.

There's nothing more rewarding than returning to what was once that bare paddock and seeing the vision become a reality. Children are playing, people are relaxing in the sun, and cafe zones have come alive with diners enjoying the company of their family and friends.

**This is why we do what we do - "inspiring ideas to enhance human experience".**

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