

# New Plazas for New Mexico: A Back to the Future Approach for Revitalizing Public Spaces

By Ken Hughes, AICP | 2001 Knight Program Fellow

Knight Program in Community Building at University of Miami School of Architecture



*Great cities, big and small, are made up not just of great buildings, but of wonderful places — public plazas, parks — all the places in which we conduct our public lives together. We need these places to sustain us, to uplift us.*

*Today, we live compartmentalized lives — we go to work, we come home. Technology has cut back the need for much face-to-face interaction. Our cities must offer beautiful public places that bring us together again. The notion of people being downtown is about people being together, not in virtual space, but in real space. Good urban design is not just about making things pretty to make architects happy. It's about providing an atmosphere that makes the daily rituals of life better, easier, perhaps even inspiring. We must continue to foster urban development that creates an atmosphere in which people enjoy the way they live.*

— Richard Rosan (President, Urban Land Institute),  
“A Celebration Of America’s Cities,” September 21, 2001

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The 291st Santa Fe Fiesta (September 2003), held in Santa Fe Plaza, is the oldest continually celebrated community festival in the United States.

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## Bio

Ken Hughes is chief planner for State of New Mexico's Department of Finance and Administration in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

## Abstract

- How can New Mexico communities resurrect plazas to renew pride and revitalize local economies while honoring local culture?
- How can plazas help transform communities into more livable places for people of all ages?
- What is a plaza as a public space type? Where should it go? How should it be repaired to make it happen again? How can it honor both daily and ritual uses?

These were the primary questions explored both by the author's Knight Fellowship research and during the "New Plazas for New Mexico" symposium held in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on October 13, 2001, where speakers explained the origins of plazas in New Mexico and offered paths toward revitalization.

When attempting plaza revitalization, several guidelines are worth heeding:

1. Ask the town what it needs. Out of active listening to residents, design in neighborliness; stir up the vision. This creates settings with a deeper sense of meaning.
2. Observe current uses. Analyze what is celebrated, protested, commemorated, mourned; revitalize plazas to be relevant for twenty-first century uses.
3. Keep it local. Root plaza uses in culture, milieu, and history; avoid trendy tourist attractions; focus on small changes, not the grand slam.
4. Attend to users' needs and rights to create a plaza full of incidental civilities; avoid changes (uses) that over time make the heart go yonder. In other words, love a place without being dangerous to it.
5. Review how the *Laws of the Indies* have lasted and endured. Keep the plaza flexible enough for different events.
6. Root in local climate, history, topography, and building practice. Ensure that the plaza is for people of all ages.
7. To fund the revitalization, raise awareness, interest, and excitement. Add quality design. The funds will follow.

8. Design in meeting and mingling; provide a rich mix of uses, interests, and ages. Anchor surrounding streets.
9. Frame the plaza with buildings to avoid physical gaps; create synergy between the plaza and its buildings.
10. Design in freedom of activities, manage out insecurity; manage the feel of the plaza to sustain it for the long haul.

The plaza can be one of the most significant tools for social and economic revitalization. Its flexibility is almost without peer in the urban setting: It can host ceremonies and concerts; calm traffic and noise; accommodate a farmers' market, a national retailer, and artisan vendors with equal ease; allow restaurants and street vendors to operate side by side; build relationships among generations and strangers; and allow citizens to learn via web access at a bus stop.

The plaza form can combat the bland and the banal environments that suburbia has woven into the American lifestyle. It can deliver us from the calamity of modernity and restore meaning to our public realm. It is a centuries-old answer to our ongoing question: How do we want to live?

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## Image

From Mesa del Sol plan by Tom Leatherwood, New Mexico State Land Office—the premier example of a New Urbanist planned development honoring *Laws of the Indies* principles. Illustration courtesy George Lawrence, Sketchbook Studio, Santa Fe.

## Introduction

Using as inspiration the sixteenth century *Laws of the Indies* and the twenty-first century *Charter of the New Urbanism*, as well as what works in public spaces around the world, this paper offers ideas for revitalizing New Mexico’s existing plazas, and for planning and designing new plazas.



The *Laws of the Indies* were compiled in 1573 by King Phillip II of Spain to instruct the colonial communities to maintain friendly relations with natives, select a town site, and distribute town lots and farming lands to colonists. The laws prescribe a main plaza, to be located in the heart of the city:

*The main plaza is to be the starting point for the town. The plaza should be either square or rectangular in shape; if the latter, the length should be at least 1½ times the width.*

—*Laws of the Indies Ordinance 112*

The physical planning effect of the *Laws of the Indies*' plaza requirement on communities throughout Spain's former colonies has been striking. More than eight hundred plazas anchored communities throughout Spain's former colonies, from New Orleans to Havana, and from San Juan to Oaxaca. To this day, plazas offer visitors and residents a memorable, walkable experience. Indeed, a central plaza is an especially salient and dear characteristic of many communities throughout Spanish America, including New Mexico.

Yet, like so many other sites of cities' birthplaces—whether it be the railroad, fort, or waterfront—time, neglect, and abuse have all too often taken their toll on even the most wonderful New Mexico plaza, reducing it to a shadow of its past glory.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, despite the world-class status of plazas in Taos and Santa Fe, the vast majority of the seventy-plus plazas in the state are vestigial places, at least when compared to their original condition.

The best public spaces are as unique as the best people, each with its own beauty, quirky personality, and regional accent. Their function is as “places in a community where people gather, where the life of the community blossoms,” according to Fred Kent, founder and president of Project for Public Spaces in New York City.

The best commons are hubs of city life where there's always something going on. Activities are the “basic building blocks” of a commons, Kent says...

Outdoor cafes provide a chance for people-watching, a favorite common-space activity. Public markets and other food-centered activities are good attractions, too, and people love to sit near fountains and touch the water...

The great commons are also highly visible and easy to get to...This quality gives a community a convenient connection to its public places and makes it easy for people to circulate within them...

Safety and cleanliness are important...

More important are character and charm. Is the space inviting and visually pleasing? Are there sculptures? Shade trees? Fountains? Do people seem to be happy there?...

Outstanding community commons provide focal points for public gatherings and accommodate a variety of social activities, from concerts to art fairs to just plain conversations.

<sup>1</sup> “European colonizers were the first and most qualified city planners, who carried out the unique achievement of urbanizing an entire continent. An obvious result of this was the construction of many beautiful settlements, which were feasible, flexible and coherent. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the norms established by the Spanish Laws of the Indies were somewhat more flexible than the norms we have now, and that the Spanish urban planners of the 16th century were more sensible than those of the 20th century.” From Mario González Sedeño, “Havana: It Is and It Isn't,” *Arquitectura y Urbanismo* 7 (1991).



So what makes a vital, healthy community commons is rather simple, really: places to sit, plenty of shade, “touchable” water, good food, and well-connected streets and sidewalks. But what a vital commons can offer a community is far from simple. A sense of identity. Belonging. Connectedness. Fun. Tradition. Stories. Great public spaces are what memories of cities are made of.<sup>2</sup>

### **Prized Plazas**

Some plazas make for better experiences than others, especially ones thoughtfully designed and managed, without excessive parking or crass commercialism. Some examples of successful plazas in North America are discussed below.

#### *San Antonio*

Planning had its inception in San Antonio, with the first Spanish migration into this region at the close of the seventeenth century. The *Laws of the Indies* prescribed town planning by dictating an elevated location, central plaza, street pattern, and sites for church, shops, government buildings, hospitals, and slaughterhouses. Today, this is most clearly seen in downtown San Antonio, where the Spanish Governor’s Palace borders Military Plaza and San Fernando Cathedral fronts Main Plaza. The plazas were built to the specifications of the old laws and have persisted to the present in shape and form.<sup>3</sup> Following the independence of Mexico from Spain, San Antonio was controlled by the Laws and Decrees of Coahuila and Texas, which regulated town planning in the territory and were similar to the *Laws of the Indies*.<sup>4</sup>

#### *New Orleans*

Pierre Le Blond de la Tour designed the initial layout of the old historic district in 1722, using squares with measured streets running in a gridded symmetrical pattern around the main square, showing full use of the *Laws of the Indies*. In 1762, Louisiana fell under Spanish rule, yet even with the change in power there was a consistent perceived need to preserve this core of the city.

After the 1788 fire, the city was to be rebuilt in the French plan. Between 1803 and 1835, New Orleans went back and forth between the hands of Spain, America, and France, as the land became a source of wealth and power. In 1803 the city was declared American, and has remained American ever since. The 1815 plan shows the continuation of a planned gridded system of streets, struggling to be symmetrical along the water with new public squares locating centers of “suburbs.”<sup>5</sup>

2 Kari McGinnis, “Great Commons of the World,” *Yes!* (Summer 2001). Available online at [www.futurenet.org/18Commons/mcginnis.htm](http://www.futurenet.org/18Commons/mcginnis.htm).

3 *Handbook of Texas*, online at [www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/print/UU/hyunw.html](http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/print/UU/hyunw.html).

4 San Antonio master plan, online at [www.salsa.net/aiasa/sa-mastp.html](http://www.salsa.net/aiasa/sa-mastp.html).

5 Gateway! New Orleans web site, online at [www.gatewayno.com/VieuxCarre/vieuxcarre.html](http://www.gatewayno.com/VieuxCarre/vieuxcarre.html).

**Photo**

Las Vegas, New Mexico.

*Mexico City*

From its inception, the colonial city was laid out on a gridiron pattern as prescribed by the Spanish monarchy and later embodied in the *Laws of the Indies*. Urban life centered on the main plaza, which in Mexico City is called the Zocalo. All governmental offices, the National Palace, and the great majority of commercial activities are located within a short distance of the plaza. While this main plaza is enveloped in nine lanes of traffic on each side, walking into the Zocalo is not an impossible task. It is not unusual to see Aztec dancers, many vendors selling food and drinks, concerts attended by thousands, and tourists lined up to view the world class treasures in the museums.<sup>6</sup>

*Las Vegas, New Mexico*

“In 1835, 29 individuals applied for and received the Las Vegas land grant from the Mexican government. The *Alcalde* (administrative justice) of nearby San Miguel del Vado accompanied the settlers to ‘the meadows,’ and, in Spanish manner according to the *Laws of the Indies*, they laid out a large plaza and surrounding community.” The plaza served first as a parking lot for wagons and a staging ground for hangings (a windmill, erected in 1876, served briefly as a vigilante gallows). However, in 1880 the nature of the plaza began to change. That year, a bandstand surrounded by trees and a picket fence was built, replacing the windmill. “Today’s plaza, with its gazebo under a canopy of mature trees, reflects efforts of Las Vegas’ first historic preservation movement... in the 1960s. The community continues to show, through architecture and land use, the intersection of the cultures and people that settled Las Vegas.”<sup>7</sup>



6 Observations of Ellen Kemper, first-time Mexico City Zocalo visitor, July 2003.

7 “A Walking Tour of the Plaza and Bridge Street Historic Districts,” Las Vegas Citizens’ Committee for Historic Preservation, 2001.

## **Laws of the Indies Prescriptions and Effects**

### **1. Consistent standard for urban design**

- Size of plazas
- Widths of streets
- Gates and walls
- Public buildings
- Land subdivision into lots

### **2. Give consistency in urban pattern: block size, street widths**

- Specialized square
- No walls around whole town, only the central buildings are fortified, especially the church
- Stone ramparts and cannon emplacements (San Juan).  
Walls only around Port Towns
- European and native quarters in the city

### **3. Caste barriers**

- Spanish aristocracy lived in central part of town, on second floors of more public buildings
- Creoles: mixed blood
- Indians and blacks lived in native quarters: smaller blocks, narrower streets

### **4. Municipal authority is limited**

- Unlike in Spain, the colonial town has little authority
- Prices are regulated by the government at home
- Guilds are regulated
- Poor sanitary conditions and public conveniences

### **5. Governance**

- The governor is the representative of the Spanish crown
- The governor controls the militia
- His taxing and spending power limited by the crown
- Substantial city revenue comes from selling municipal positions
- Municipal finance is in considerable disorder

**6. Crown intervention**

- Regional territories are set up
- Center takes over municipal functions: budgeting, street cleaning, water supply, hospitals and jails, markets, bakeries
- Towns improve, cost is an all-inclusive state

**7. Capital cities are sites for viceroy's seat, habitat of captains and generals**

- Monetary power
- Church: spiritual power
- Universities: sources of knowledge

**8. Trade**

- Restricted to the home country; colonies cannot trade with other European nations, nor with each other
- Restrictive trade practices result in
  - Shortage of goods
  - Exorbitant prices
  - Depressed living standards
  - Smuggling and corruption
- Agricultural production
  - Spain sends seeds, plants, breeding animals; it encouraged native crops such as corn, vanilla
  - Crops that might compete with Spain—such as grapes, olives, and silk—were not allowed
  - Huge land estates are formed
  - Inheritance is through primogeniture
  - Lands only partially cultivated with slave labor, not good exploitation of asset

**9. Industry**

- No manufacture that would compete with the home industry
- Monopolistic middle man in the trade with Spain
- Manufacture for local market only
- Aristocrats did not understand industry
- Indians did not acquire industrial skills

**10. Church**

- Has huge rural holdings
- Acquires urban real estate
- Wealth is nontaxable
- Enter business and finance, charge high interest rates
- Fewer civil buildings are created than churches

**11. City does not develop**

- Infrastructure poor: few roads, not allowed to work with other municipalities
- Lack of industry
- Lack of skilled labor
- Lack of progressive agriculture
- Cities not integrated with rural hinterland

**Source:** A University of Michigan Hispanic Studies Program paper.

## Examples of New Mexico Communities With Plazas

### *Chimayo*

Here, the world-famous Santuario Chimayo, with healing powers ascribed to its soils, frames the village plaza.

### *Mesilla*

All the ingredients of daily civility—church, bookstore, restaurant, neighborhood bar—co-exist around the gazebo-adorned plaza.

### *Monticello*

Monticello's plaza was founded as a Mexican garrison in the early 1800s. Today it exudes rural charm like few others still do. Stefanos Polyzoides, of the New Urbanist firm Moule and Polyzoides, feels that this plaza deserves UNESCO world heritage designation.

### *Doña Ana*

A rural hamlet, now part of the suburban area of Las Cruces (the state's second-largest city), Doña Ana has benefited from a prize-winning charrette led by the University of New Mexico's Chris Wilson and the architecture firm of Moule & Polyzoides. With state funding, the plaza soon will be reborn to serve as a link among civic, religious, and historic sites.

### *Las Vegas*

(see page 8)

### *Albuquerque*

While not as well known as Santa Fe's, the Old Town Plaza in the Duke City emanates charm and a real sense of place. The plaza area hosts many restaurants, shops, and a church.

### *Santa Fe*

The world-renowned plaza hosts the nation's longest-celebrated civic event, the 292-year-strong fiesta. These days, however, tourists outnumber locals for most of the year; the only exceptions are the fiesta, Independence Day, the December *Las Posadas* procession, and the May community day.

### *Taos\**

Taos received a grant from the state in 2002 for a daylong workshop that attracted over one hundred Taosenos to talk out what it will take to make the plaza theirs once again. The workshop has already led to a new cinema, outdoor restaurant, and streetscaping of nearby alleys.

**Photo**

Motorcycle marriage,  
Old Town, Albuquerque.



*Española*

*Ranchos de Taos*

*La Union*

*La Mesa*

*Trampas*

*San Jose*

*Socorro\**

### **New Mexico Communities Seeking a Plaza**

#### *Las Cruces\**

The state's second-largest city seeks to reclaim its plaza (now the site of a drive-up bank), and also to revitalize its moribund downtown. It has attracted \$700,000 in state funding for the plaza and has enlisted the help of the planning firm Sites Southwest to draw up a downtown revitalization plan.

#### *Los Ranchos de Albuquerque*

Los Ranchos' design charrette in 2000 envisioned a plaza where there now exists a strip mall and four-lane street. This led to adoption in 2003 of an award-winning revision in the village's zoning, to apply planning tools such as transfer of development rights and density districts.

\*Communities planning and designing new/revitalized plazas in 2002.

*Gallup*

Founded as a railroad town with no plaza, Gallup is combining state, county, and city funds to carry out another award-winning effort, a November 2002 plaza and downtown redevelopment charrette, with the help of a team that is catalyzing the turnaround of downtown Albuquerque.

*Hobbs**Edgewood**Dixon**Bernalillo (founded 1598) to replace previous plaza**Truth or Consequences (founded as Hot Springs)***Ten Ways to Reclaim the Plaza**

To get back to the state in the community where its physical heart—the plaza—resonates as a prized place for all, follow these ten steps. Where relevant the steps are accompanied by the applicable *Laws of the Indies* ordinance, paired with our era’s version, the *Charter of the New Urbanism*.<sup>9</sup> Key questions for public participation follow, suitable for charrettes or other community processes.

**1. Ask the town what it needs**

Public space authority Fred Kent urges trusting your own community residents, noting that “in any community there are people who can provide an historical perspective, valuable insights into how the area functions, and an understanding of the critical issues and what is meaningful to people.”<sup>10</sup>

Public space design excels when it creates settings with a deeper sense of meaning. The surest way to identify what people need in a public place is simply to ask them. An open house held in Santa Fe in September 2001 not only gathered much citizen input on a rail yard plaza, it identified citizen talents that complemented the aspirations. The vision statement developed at an October 2001 Silver City workshop said that Silver City is “a town that seeks to preserve and foster our eclectic and artistic small town atmosphere while promoting our health and well-being.” A community will not go very far without a shared vision. Reminders of that vision are also important—restaurants in some Midwestern towns have the community’s vision statement printed on their place mats; we would do well to emulate such vision-driven marketing efforts.

9 New Urbanism is an urban design movement founded in 1993 that advocates reform in real estate development with the aim of reducing sprawl by developing neighborhoods that are walkable, with a diverse range of housing and jobs. The Charter of the New Urbanism is the movement’s seminal document. The full text of the Charter is available online, on the website for the Congress for the New Urbanism, [www.cnu.org](http://www.cnu.org).

10 Fred Kent, *How to Turn a Place Around: A Handbook for Creating Successful Public Spaces* (Project for Public Spaces, 2000).



*The main plaza is to be the starting point for the town. The plaza should be either square or rectangular in shape; if the latter, the length should be at least 1½ times the width.*

—*Laws of the Indies* Ordinance 112

*Cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accessible public spaces and community institutions; urban places should be framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice.*

—*Charter of the New Urbanism*

#### **Public participation questions:**

- **How many times have you been to your local plaza in the past year?**
- **What activities have you observed there?**
- **What works best while you are there?**
- **What do you feel is lacking?**

#### **Lesson:**

- **Get the “vision juices” flowing: They are needed to gather the planning, political, and financial will to make any large public works project happen.**

## **2. Observe current uses**

As a starting point, observe what is currently occurring in the plaza. Is the plaza not used much? Underused? Incorrectly used? Are benches used not only for sitting, but also for sleeping, lovemaking, dancing?

A working plaza can serve as a place where children observe their parents safely interacting with strangers, a rarity in this country and in these times. A plaza can meet this, as well other social needs of the community.

A community can manage what happens in the plaza and how things are done. If pedestrian access is a priority and garish signs are not, say so. If political engagement—protests, candlelight vigils, and celebrations—resonates with your community, encourage residents to gather at the plaza. I witnessed this type of community choice in Telluride’s square in 1997, listening to a county commissioner recite Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl.”

*The size of the plaza should be proportional to the population, taking expected growth into consideration; at a minimum, it should be 200' x 300'; and maximum size should be 532' x 800'. 400' x 600' is recommended as a good proportion.*

—*Laws of the Indies Ordinance 113*

*Streets and squares should be safe, comfortable, and interesting to the pedestrian. Properly configured, they encourage walking and enable neighbors to know each other and protect their communities.*

—*Charter of the New Urbanism*

#### **Public participation questions:**

- **How can New Mexico communities resurrect plazas to renew pride and revitalize local economies while honoring local culture?**
- **Why are plazas under challenge for meaning in New Mexico?**
- **Can plazas be relevant for twenty-first century New Mexico communities?**

#### **Lesson:**

- **Choosing uses of the plaza are a function of who you are as a community.**

### *3. Keep it local*

For authenticity, plazas must be rooted in the local culture, milieu, and history. Thus, when new ideas and elements are introduced into a plaza, its caretakers should ensure their compatibility with the original plaza design.

The king of Spain controlled the design of sixteenth century plazas. Today, many players affect community design: the highway department, the postal service, Wal-Mart, Texaco, and their local agents all have ideas about such issues as the number of parking spaces, building size, and location. Too often, players whose agenda are detrimental to plaza fabric influence plaza design and functions in ways that are out of sync with community needs.

“Keep it local” also means not going for the grand slam every time. “Plazafficianados” should choose a tangible improvement to make each year, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant—just as there’s been incremental degradation, there can be incremental success. For example, putting its focus on small, quaint pastel buildings and outdoor areas has transformed Miami Beach from a slum into a nine billion dollar real estate bonanza, with world-famous public spaces like Lincoln Road and Ocean Drive. Albuquerque rents out its plaza for events ranging from marriages to fiestas, a celebratory line item on that city’s budget. Stores and galleries surrounding Santa Fe’s plaza, whose rents sometimes top \$100/square foot, are the equivalent of a supermall’s square footage without the mall look.

**Photo**

Santa Fe Fiesta in Santa Fe Plaza,  
September 2003.



*The four principal streets begin from the middle of each side of the plaza,  
and eight other streets begin from each corner.*

*—Laws of the Indies Ordinance 114*

*Architecture and landscape design should grow from local climate,  
topography, history, and building practice.*

*—Charter of the New Urbanism*

**Public participation questions:**

- Do conversations happen between friends and strangers?
- Where in the plaza do conversations happen?

**Lesson:**

- Better results derive from acting locally on many little things that add up,  
rather than focusing on a single, large action.

*4. Love a place without being dangerous to it*

*“We may love a place yet still be dangerous to it.” —Wallace Stegner*

Attention to the needs and rights of plaza users is the means of offering incidental civilities to a plaza. Great care must be taken in the plaza’s design and use so that it becomes a place loved and, over time, renewed, without it being a place obsessed over to such a degree that the plaza becomes a victim of admiration.

Redesigning old plazas may require weaving in local history as buildings are erected on bare lots, old buildings are restored, and facades are created over spaces that require shoring up. Over time, incremental changes creep in and we then wonder how it happened that the plaza lost much of what was once loved. The task becomes one of emulating the past for what was desired, while avoiding uses that stray from the guiding vision for the plaza.

**Public participation questions:**

- **Is the plaza still worth keeping, and why?**
- **What do you feel are the best features of the plaza?**
- **If the plaza is not working, how can it be fixed?**

**Lesson:**

- **A formula for success that works elsewhere, such as in suburban malls, is doomed to fail in a plaza. Be true to the plaza—its history, its strengths, and its other unique characteristics.**

*5. Same as it ever was: sixteenth century lessons for the twenty-first century*

It is helpful to review a plaza's changes, using historical photos and documents, to gain a perspective on the changes that have occurred over time. What makes a plaza great is the sense of identity attached to it by residents and visitors alike. We used to know how to build communities; however, the forces that now shape communities are hard to control. Change used to be more gradual, allowing for trial and error to discern what works. But today we have a veritable explosion of uncoded design and building types; we move forward too quickly to learn from our mistakes. It is critical that we pay more attention to evaluating and refining steps in the design process. The message of the twentieth century was that we can't rebuild our communities, we can only live in the country. This is an unacceptable message; planning needs to reconnect with its roots as we move forward. Redefining the meaning and value of the plaza is a fitting and symbolic approach toward a "back to the future" path of planning in the twenty-first century.

Plazas have been victims of our hurtling forward and as a result, some have fallen victim to over-design, which may eliminate the ability to host special occasion events or celebrations. If so, the community has the right to make design and use changes when the plaza no longer meets its needs.<sup>11</sup>

*The buildings around the edge of the plaza are to have portales, as are those on the four principal streets. At the corners, however, the portales should stop so that the sidewalks of the eight other streets can be aligned with the plaza.*

—*Laws of the Indies* Ordinance 115

*Civic buildings and public gathering places require important sites to reinforce community identity and the culture of democracy. They deserve distinctive form, because their role is different from that of other buildings and places that constitute the fabric of the city.*

—*Charter of the New Urbanism*

#### **Public participation questions:**

- **Is the plaza flexible enough to use for different, temporary outdoor events?**
- **How can New Urbanist design guidelines and planning processes help reintroduce vibrancy?**

#### **Lesson:**

- **Many plaza functions have worked well for centuries. Be bold when it's time to leave well enough alone.**

### ***6. It's not just a park—it's a plaza***

The plaza is the heart, the starting point vis-à-vis the *Laws of the Indies*, the community gathering spot for celebrations, the geographical glue that binds community culture together. It must be designed and managed to be flexible enough to offer users substantial freedom of use and for people of all ages to claim symbolic ownership, allowing for continual change and adaptations.

Plaza design should incorporate local climate, history, topography, and building practice. The community comprehensive plan can be the vehicle by which the plaza is integrated into the town's future. Tools available to assist in this task include:

<sup>11</sup> Steven Carr, et. al., *Public Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 175.

**Photo**

Santa Fe Fiesta in Santa Fe Plaza,  
September 2003.



- Participatory charrettes and other learning tools
- Partnerships of county, town, college, business, nonprofits
- Investments of what's bought and what's built
- Regulations to funnel standards and principles
- Incentives to meet the vision

*In cold climates, the towns should have wide streets; in hot climates, narrow streets.*  
—*Laws of the Indies* Ordinance 116

*Preservation and renewal of historic buildings, districts, and landscapes affirm the continuity and evolution of urban society.*  
—*Charter of the New Urbanism*

**Public participation question:**

- **How can new and reborn plazas help transform towns into more livable, usable places for people of all ages?**

**Lesson:**

- **Build quality, avoid the scraggly and cheap.**

### *7. Money from Uncle Sam, Sister State, Tia Town, and Los Pueblos*

Quality planning and design should be rewarded with good money. One rule of thumb is that for every hour that citizens participate in the planning and design of a public space, ten dollars is invested in the community. Another maxim holds that for every public dollar invested into downtown, eight private dollars will materialize; the only catch is that the public investment usually must be committed first.

One source of public financing is the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Community Development Block Grant program (CDBG), run by the Local Government Division of the State of New Mexico. New Mexico communities are eligible for up to \$400,000 for capital facilities, as long as a community or a neighborhood is fifty-one percent or more low to moderate income. If a community seeks to plan a project such as a plaza to prevent or eliminate slum or blight, \$25,000 CDBG planning grants are available.

The Local Government Division can not only help communities pursue CDBG funds, it can also assist any community with a One Stop Shop of state and federal funding agencies, who will assemble to help any town wishing to fund a plaza. This cuts down the time needed to package funding from dozens of hours to one. The division also extends to communities use of its web site in creative, interactive ways to more fully and more meaningfully incorporate citizen viewpoints into proposed plaza designs, in an iterative process of virtual town halls.

In 2000, New Mexico was the only state to give out Main Street construction grants. Should this funding be resumed, a plaza design charrette and construction could be available for Main Street communities.

Local sources of funding demonstrate local support for a project. Successful available funding sources include tax increment financing, lodgers' tax, general obligation bonds, and private contributions.

*Public spaces should be designed to encourage the attention and presence of people at all hours of the day and night.*

*—The Alhambra Principles, Community Principle #9,  
California Local Government Commission*

**Public participation question:**

- **How can a plaza be made adaptable to change, so that each shift in users does not require that it be reconstructed?**

**Lesson:**

- **Raise awareness, interest, excitement, and quality design, and funds will follow.**

*8. A plaza works hard*

Plazas can elicit a whole range of impressions, from urban excitement to pastoral splendor. The ambience of a plaza is no fluke—a great deal of thought, design, and work go into creating such feeling in the central public place. Even more care is needed to maintain the look and feel of the plaza—periodic maintenance is necessary, not just once a century, as seems the case with some of New Mexico’s plazas. One way to reassess the function and design features of a plaza is to review it every five years, along with similar reviews that occur to update a community’s comprehensive plan.

Designer Christopher Alexander notes that when people with a shared way of life gather together to rub shoulders, it confirms their community.<sup>12</sup> Santa Fe’s plaza has hosted its citizenry rubbing shoulders for 292 years to celebrate the town’s fiesta. Every Saturday night, kids cruise near the plaza in a ritual celebration of youth. Such celebrations offer predictable, shared experiences that bind people together in the present and allow them to feel part of history. The experience may be fleeting, but the memory lasts forever.<sup>13</sup> The plaza experience also conveys meaning, as the space is comfortable enough to allow an experience to occur within, and positive connections create a sense of belonging, safety, and protection.<sup>14</sup>

*Open space functions differently in a new urbanist community. A new urbanist community’s open space works hard. In a conventional subdivision, open space is often used as a buffer between one subdivision and the next. In contrast, new urbanist community open space is centrally located, in the form of squares, plazas and small parks where people can meet and mingle...intended as open-air market-places, with farmers’ markets, pushcarts, kiosks or other small, semi-permanent store buildings.*

—Doris Goldstein, *Legal Planning For New Urbanist Communities*

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 190.



**Public participation questions:**

- **Must adaptable space be bland?**
- **How can plaza space be made scintillating?**

**Lesson:**

- **All kinds of social activities, as well as simple functions like sitting and watching the show, must be thought through in order for the plaza to work.**

*9. The plaza is the space in the street wall of buildings*

In a sense, plazas are like jazz, which requires that there be space between the notes, but not too much space—too much space between notes kills the song. In town planning, too much distance between buildings fronting a street effectively kills the public space. American towns and cities invariably have too much space in the form of parking lots, overly wide streets, and other paeans to the automobile.

Transforming dead urban space into plazas, parks, and boulevards is a major design, political, and financial issue. Since even a thirty-foot gap for off-street parking can kill retail on either side of that lot, according to Andres Duany,<sup>15</sup> community members should insist on the continuity of a street wall around a plaza, even if opting for a facade or other design tricks to hide empty space. Indeed, “facadomy” is a design tool that can add up to visually positive plaza improvements in a short period of time.<sup>16</sup> The alternative is to let the influence of sprawl development essentially punch out a plaza’s “teeth”; i.e., the buildings that line it.

The only way to combat fifty years of sprawl’s negative transformation is through knowledge of traditions and the will to act on that knowledge. New Urbanism is creating bridges between past and future planning practices. At the Village of Doña Ana’s charrette in March 2001, Stefanos Polyzoides, vice chairman of the Congress for the New Urbanism, proposed starting with the following questions when reviving a plaza:

- What is a place?
- What is a plaza as an open space type? What is it for this village?
- How should it be repaired to make it happen again?
- How can it honor both daily and ritual uses?

<sup>15</sup> Andres Duany, Presentation at Smart Growth Conference. Baltimore, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Chris Calott, AIA. Presentation at *Your Town Session*. Silver City, 2001.

**Public participation questions:**

- **Can the same plaza be meaningful to diverse groups of users?**
- **Given a diversity of users and shifts in their social composition and needs, how can a place have meaning over time?**

**Lesson:**

- **The plaza and its surrounding buildings create a synergistic relationship; one without the other leaves a void.**

*10. To design is human, to manage divine*

A plaza must be designed and managed to create a comforting atmosphere. This is especially important for women and young children, who have a heightened degree of sensitivity over issues of safety, security, and comfort in the context of public spaces.

New plazas must be designed for maximum freedom to engage in satisfying activities, while assuring plaza-goers freedom from disturbance, interference, or threats. The latter is a product of active management that sets out and delivers reasonable rules, adequate choices and opportunities to support the needs of users.<sup>17</sup>

Business improvement districts (BIDs) are a relatively new phenomenon in American cities. A BID can be a tool to self-assess business property owners to pay for activities such as graffiti control, street and sidewalk cleanings, and crime prevention, which lead to an improved and well-maintained downtown. San Diego's Little Italy BID is an example of how the little things have helped to transform a sleepy neighborhood into a vibrant example of urbanism tenets, both new and old.

*The streets should run from the plaza in such a manner as to allow for substantial growth without inconvenience or adverse effects on appearance, defense, or comfort.*

—*Laws of the Indies* Ordinance 117

**To summarize, the following characteristics work best for plazas:<sup>18</sup>**

- **Centrality of place**
- **Physical supports of surrounding pedestrian streets**
- **Drawing power of a structure of use**
- **Simple form, not over-designed**
- **Interesting events not necessarily programmed, with needs satisfied for drama, amusement, discovery of the unexpected, and relief from life's pressures**
- **Linkage of people in ways that allow strangers to prompt conversations, and allow children safe ways to interact**
- **Presence of water + greenery = oasis**
- **Outdoor art, such as murals**

**Lesson:**

- **What holds true for plazas of the twenty-first century can be derived directly from the sixteenth century *Laws of the Indies*.**

**Plaza Functions and Activities**

Design and management of a plaza must allow for both evocative and flexible settings, responsive to changing users and uses over time. The plaza should be “open-minded space, not single-minded, designed for a variety of uses, including unforeseen and unforeseeable uses, and used by citizens who do different things and are prepared to tolerate, even take an interest in, things they don’t do.”<sup>19</sup> This may be hard to do where there exists many cultural groups with differing traditions and antagonistic views of one another, but New Mexico has almost perfected the art of normally celebrating, not despising, differences. With that in mind, here is a partial list of functions, uses, and activities possible for New Mexico plazas:

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>19</sup> Walzer, “Pleasures and Costs of Urbanity.” *Dissent*: 430.

**Photo**

Santa Fe Fiesta in  
Santa Fe Plaza, September 2003.



### *1. Traffic calming*

- Circle, rectangle or square geometry
- Bulb outs at crosswalks
- Five-to-ten mph posted speed limit
- Street, as in a Dutch woonerf, becomes a shared auto/pedestrian space, with pedestrians having legal right-of-way over cars, in a landscaped, pedestrian environment. Cars must travel at walking speed to avoid trees, benches, and posts.<sup>20</sup>

### *2. Ugly calming*

- Oasis of beauty
- Noise calming measures

### *3. Health and nutrition*

- Tai chi
- Walks/strolls
- Parcourse (exercise stations) within/as *objets d'arts*
- Mobile screening units
- Cooking class

#### *4. Bike facilities*

- Parking
- Touring start/end point
- Pedicabs

#### *5. Landscaping*

- Native plants
- Edible
- Air filtering
- Oasis feel

#### *6. Entertainment*

- Concerts at the gazebo
- Carriage rides
- Light/laser/water show

#### *7. Shopping*

- Farmers' market
- Flea market
- Sales of local artisans' works, under portales or in stores

#### *8. Relationship building*

Casual grouping among same and different generations

Gossiping

Safe interactions among strangers

Movable benches to enhance conversations

Game tables

#### *9. Dining*

Restaurant tables inside and out, blurring the public/private edge

Vendors selling from push carts or kiosks

Ice cream parlor

### *10. Learning*

Branch library with web access

Bus stop with web access

### *11. Water*

Dog-accessible fountain

Potable water bubbler

### *12. Surrounding activities/uses*

Shops

Library

Computer center

Heritage center

Residences

Preserves and fields

Church

Historic adobe residences

Hotels

## **Conclusion**

Two complex phenomena occur in New Mexico concurrently, often at cross-purposes. The first is economic inferiority, where we rank near or at the bottom of most rankings. For instance, one in five New Mexican adults and one in four children live in poverty. Despite rapid population growth and physical expansion of our cities, any increase in the tax base is outweighed by increased demands for infrastructure and services. Much is done in the state to overcome our economic inferiority complex, yet we have precious little to show for it. We are running hard just to stay in place, while lasting economic growth eludes New Mexico.

*In northern New Mexico, Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo residents are discovering that below their bland, homogenized landscape of franchise motels and restaurants, ancient history is exerting a powerful, subterranean pull.*

—James Brooke, *New York Times*, 2/9/98

The second phenomenon is cultural superiority, where New Mexico rates at the top, in no small part due to the head start the *Laws of the Indies* bequeathed us. Visitors are struck by our prominent Native American and Hispanic cultures. Nowhere else in the United States is there a capital city founded in 1610, yet this is new compared to the Native American communities of Acoma and Taos Pueblos, each dating back to the eleventh century. Age-old traditions of adobe houses and *acequias* water delivery systems reflect and honor the Chacoans as well as the Moors. Such images have been captured by artists Edward Curtis, Ansel Adams, and Georgia O'Keefe, among others.

These inferiority and superiority complexes clash continuously, sometimes erupting in headlines, but always just below the surface is a palpable tension between the two. From a land use and plaza preservation perspective, the economic urge to overcome inferiority has been winning out over the cultural urge to preserve what is left.

At the turn of the last century, most New Mexicans owed their livelihood to an economy based on mining, logging, or agriculture. Common land and water (*ejidos* and *acequias*) served as physical bonds, faith and family (*fe* and *familia*) as cultural bonds. The twenty-first century New Mexico economy is based on silicon and scenery, the former for computer chips, the latter for plazas transformed into snapshot backdrops. Native New Mexicans lament the loss of the sense of community inherent in the physical nature of traditional New Mexico settlements, whether they are Hispanic *barrios*, Indian pueblos, ranches, or small towns. Albuquerque natives look back fondly on their 1950s city as one of diverse neighborhoods, and Santa Feans remember well when locals frequented the plaza before it became a place of play for tourists. Others from small towns recall vibrant main streets. Today urban, rural, and subdivision interests do not coincide in an era of a larger and increasingly diverse population. The glue that historically has bound together the New Mexico culture is under great challenge from growth and change.

While cultural and community bonds remain palpable, rigid opposition to planning and zoning is softening in rural New Mexico, especially when no other method for preserving long-held lifestyles works. The challenge is to find the right mix of design and land use planning tools that can meet both economic and cultural aspirations. Perhaps the full application of these planning tools can buffer the effects of economic and physical growth on New Mexico's cultural and natural resources.

**Photo**

Santa Fe Fiesta in  
Santa Fe Plaza, September 2003.



## Appendix A — Notable Public Spaces

Inspiration on what works in public spaces goes beyond New Mexico’s plazas. Here is a list of 2001 inspirations from notable public spaces I was most fortunate to visit and witness:

- ✓ Miami Beach, Florida: Lincoln Road and Ocean Drive
- ✓ Boston, Massachusetts: Faneuil Hall’s “pedestrianized” main street
- ✓ New York City’s Bryant Park and San Diego’s Little Italy: Business Improvement Districts’ public space management
- ✓ London, England: Georgian-era neighborhood’s three-block-long parks
- ✓ Durham, England: outdoor market (packed—even on a raw April day)
- ✓ Brussels, Belgium: Main Square
- ✓ Bruges, Belgium: series of interconnected plazas
- ✓ Cambridge, England: shopping promenades
- ✓ Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Square
- ✓ Edinburgh, Scotland: Royal Mile
- ✓ Luxembourg: squares enclosed with the finest buildings
- ✓ St. Paul, Minnesota: Summit Avenue parkway
- ✓ Coral Gables, Florida: entrances into the municipality
- ✓ Chester, England; Vail, Colorado; Park City, Utah; and Pagosa Springs, Colorado: roundabouts
- ✓ Amsterdam: flea market just off a canal
- ✓ Leiden, Netherlands: floral market just off a canal



- ✓ Pueblo, Colorado: river walk through former industrial area
- ✓ Durango, Colorado: Main Street’s buildings and facades all made of stone or brick

## **Appendix B — Understanding How Places Work**

### **1. Uses and Activities**

#### *Questions*

- ✓ Are people using the space or is it empty?
- ✓ Is it used by a range of ages?
- ✓ Do people cluster in groups? What kinds of groups—couples, friends, coworkers, families, small or large?
- ✓ How many types of activities are occurring—such as walking, eating, relaxing, reading, playing soccer, chess?
- ✓ Which parts of the space are used and which are not? Are there noticeable patterns—for example are elderly using the benches; small children clustered around the swings; teenagers hanging around the entrance?
- ✓ Is it easy to go from one part of the space to another?
- ✓ How does the overall design relate to people’s use of the space?
- ✓ For example, are entrances and paths, benches and “basuras” made convenient?
- ✓ Are there obvious choices of things to do? Are events and activities being held, or made evident by a schedule? Who is responsible for the events? How does the design of the space relate to events held there?
- ✓ Is there a management presence? Can you identify that anyone is in charge?

#### *Visible signs of problems*

- ✓ The space is empty of people for most or all of the day.
- ✓ The space is congested because it is too small for the number of people present.
- ✓ There is a lack of places to sit.
- ✓ There is a lack of gathering points—activities are isolated from each other, there are no focal points.
- ✓ The space does not accommodate events very well.

*Ways of improving the space*

- ✓ Provide amenities that will support desired activities.
- ✓ Create focal points where people will gather.
- ✓ Develop a series of community-oriented programs with local talent from institutions to attract people in the short term and to demonstrate that someone is in charge.
- ✓ Change the types of events that are held or modify the space, if necessary, to better accommodate events.
- ✓ Work with adjacent property owners and retailers to develop strategies to lease ground floors of empty buildings and help revitalize the area.

**2. Comfort and Image***Questions*

- ✓ Does the place make a good first impression?
- ✓ Are there more women than men?
- ✓ Are there enough places to sit? Do people have a choice of places to sit, either in the sun or shade? Is appropriate weather protection offered?
- ✓ Is there a management presence or is it apparent that anyone is in charge of the space? Are spaces clean and free of litter? Who is responsible for maintenance? What do they do? When?
- ✓ Does the area feel safe? Is there a security presence? If so, what do these people do? When are they on duty?
- ✓ Are people taking photos?
- ✓ Do vehicles dominate pedestrian use of the space or prevent them from easily getting to the space?

*Visible signs of problems*

- ✓ There are too few places to sit.
- ✓ No one appears to be in charge.
- ✓ The space is unattractive or feels unsafe.
- ✓ Litter or other signs of poor maintenance are evident.
- ✓ “Undesirables” are able to dominate the space.
- ✓ Security problems are evident: broken windows, graffiti, vandalism, etc.
- ✓ Vehicles dominate the space.

*Ways to improve a place's comfort and image*

- ✓ Add amenities—seating, telephones, waste receptacles, info booths, food vendors, public art, flowers, fountains—in carefully considered locations.
- ✓ Create a management presence through vendors or food/info kiosks, by creating an entrance or adding a view onto the place from windows in an adjacent building.
- ✓ Increase security.

**3. Access and Linkages**

- ✓ Can you see the space from a distance? Is the interior visible from the outside?
- ✓ Can people easily walk to the place?
- ✓ Do sidewalks lead to and from adjacent areas, allowing for convenient access?
- ✓ Does the space function for special needs folks?
- ✓ Do roads and paths match where people want to go?
- ✓ Do occupants of adjacent buildings use the space?
- ✓ Is access provided by transportation options?

*Visible signs of problems*

- ✓ Traffic is congested or fast moving and is a barrier to pedestrians.
- ✓ Bicycles are infrequently used as a way of access.
- ✓ People are walking in the street or wearing paths through areas not paved as sidewalks.
- ✓ Pedestrian-oriented uses such as storefronts are discontinuous,
- ✓ Creating an unpleasant walking environment.
- ✓ There is insufficient parking.

*Ways of improving the accessibility of the space*

- ✓ Widen sidewalks or provide sidewalk extensions at crosswalks, better balancing pedestrian uses with other uses.
- ✓ Construct more clearly marked or more conveniently located sidewalks.
- ✓ Make accommodations for bicycle users.
- ✓ Infill vacant lots with structures and uses to create continuity of pedestrian experience.

- ✓ Balance on-street parking with other uses.
- ✓ Change traffic signal timing to improve pedestrian access.
- ✓ Improve use of parking through changes in enforcement or regulation.

#### **4. Sociability**

- ✓ Is this a place where you would choose to meet your friends?
- ✓ Do people come in groups?
- ✓ Are people talking with each other?
- ✓ Are people smiling?
- ✓ Do people seem to use the place regularly and by choice?
- ✓ Do users know each other by face or by name?
- ✓ Do people bring their friends and relatives to see the place or do they point to one of the elements with pride?
- ✓ Do strangers make eye contact with each other?
- ✓ Is there a mix of ages and ethnic groups that generally reflects the community at large?
- ✓ Do people tend to pick up litter when they see it?

##### *Visible signs of problems*

- ✓ People do not interact with other users of the place.
- ✓ There is a lack of diversity of people using the place.

##### *Ways of improving the sociability of the space*

- ✓ Develop focal points—public gathering places that accommodate a variety of activities.
- ✓ Arrange amenities to encourage social interaction, with moveable seating or grouping of benches.
- ✓ Stage special events and activities to draw people.
- ✓ Encourage community volunteers to assist with improvements or maintenance of a place.
- ✓ Provide a variety of uses in adjacent buildings to attract a diversity of people.