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Questions to Ask a Space

Ronald Lee Fleming

Pondering some of the banal, bleak and dreary public spaces we have created in the past several decades, I concluded that it might help commissioners, city planners and members of boards that review design proposals to have a set of questions to ask when evaluating a space. Some of these questions, which follow, relate to conditions I observed in Albuquerque's Civic Plaza. But, in fact, most could be asked of spaces anywhere.

1. Do the configuration and size of the space support the functions that were planned for it?

2. Does the space have a complexity that allows it to be enjoyed by a variety of users?

3. Conversely, is it simple enough to be memorable as an integral space?

4. Is there a clear sense of direction across the space to popular destinations on the other side?

5. If one were blindfolded, would one encounter obstacles in passing across the space?

6. Can an elderly person sit in the sun and feel safe?

7. Does the space support a defined palette of colors appropriate to the cityscape?

8. Can one comfortably eat outdoors, or watch a concert, or do both at the same time?

9. Can a small child find sources of amusement in the space? Are there design clues that can help a lost child find its way out of the space?

10. Does the space avoid complex level changes, sunken areas and hidden alcoves that might encourage anti-social behavior?

11. Conversely, does it provide a variety of feelings of enclosure that sustain various levels of intimacy?

12. Does the space include a location where people go so they can be seen by others?



13. Are the materials in the space easily maintained or replaced, such as stonedust or gravel?

14. Can a handicapped person easily traverse the space, find comfortable places to rest within it and use the drinking fountain and restrooms?

15. On a sunny afternoon, can you buy a snack, a book, a balloon, or a city map?

16. Does the space provide a clear sense of destination for pedestrians?

17. Is the space designed to support special events? Does it have electrical outlets, inserts for kiosks and removable bollards to block off areas?

18. Can you play games in the space, for example, bocci, shuffleboard, or chess?

19. Is the space accessible to fire trucks, utility equipment, or catering vans? Can these vehicles easily negotiate the space without damaging it, and are the paving, utility outlets and landscaping resilient enough to stand up to this traffic?

20. Can you see across the space?

21. Is there information that tells you what was there before?

22. Are there narrative elements connecting various parts of the space?

23. Does the space encourage you to savor moments of contemplation?

24. Are there elements in the space that help you to measure time and the passage of the seasons, to understand the movement of the planets or the evolution of the area's geology?

25. Is there flora that is native to the place?

26. Do the works of art in the space have meanings that are accessible to the general public?

27. Does the space reduce the impact of the visual cacophony of its surroundings? Conversely, does the space strengthen a vocabulary of design elements that are used (or could be used) appropriately throughout the surrounding area?

28. Do the design elements in the space relate to the human figure?

29. Does the human figure create a sense of dimension in the space?

30. Do the intricacies in the space sustain interest; are they worth considering five or six times?

31. Are the building materials, building finishes and structures in the space of the type a child would wish to touch? Can one see where these touches, accumulated over time, have left a visible trace?

32. Are there design features in the space that the community could add to over time?

33. Are there design elements that encourage one to linger in the space? For example, are there moveable chairs so one can define his or her own space? Are there comfortable benches in the shade on a hot day and in the sun on a cold one?

34. Are there elements of continuity that reinforce the overall design character of the space and establish a pattern that is discernable by pedestrians, not only from a bird's eye view?

35. Does the space avoid arbitrary shapes or objects out of scale to their relative importance in the design?

36. Does the space allow the viewer to enjoy its intimate details?

37. Can you hear special sounds in the space: the rustle of leaves, the thud of horseshoes, the trickle of water, or the music of a band?

38. Is there relief from the hot sun?

39. Do the design elements used in the space include arts and crafts particular to the region?

Designers who find good answers for these questions will be well on their way to creating better public spaces. However, I believe that most designs can be improved through concentrated review by a discerning group of potential users, who also should ask these questions. The space may then succeed in transcending its physicality, becoming an environment of meanings and layered uses that create and sustain a feeling of place. With that feeling, I hope, will come a sense of community proprietorship for the space.

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The Albuquerque Civic Plaza.

Photo by R. Lujan.

**Courtesy City of Albuquerque
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