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The Return of the Civic Square

Fred I. Kent, Andrew G. Schwarz

Despite the misty-eyed memory that many people have of the American town commons or village green, the plain truth is that most of our cities no longer have a good central, civic square.

But in our travels and in our conversations with citizens and public officials, we are beginning to see a remarkable change. After decades of ignoring the viability of the city center as a social, outdoor environment, suddenly nearly every mayor and planner seems to want a central square. Our office is being contacted at an astonishing rate by large and small cities for help in building squares and plazas that attract people and reinvigorate public life. Another indication is that the U.S. Conference of Mayors named parks as its theme last year. Parks aren't civic squares, of course, but it appears that mayors are finally beginning to understand the power of public places in their cities.

Here are some concrete examples. Downtown Detroit has been regarded by some as an urban basket case, its empty skyscrapers a testament to an era of American urbanism that is long past. Now the city is trying to re-energize its nearly vacated downtown with new office buildings and an open space plan as part of the city's tricentennial celebration.

Detroit 300, a task force of civic leaders appointed and steered by Mayor Dennis Archer, has developed a bold revitalization plan for a five-block area adjacent to the government center on Cadillac Square. New tenants have leased significant amounts of office space in the area, but the lynchpin of the concept is Campus Martius, a two-acre central plaza that will replace a traffic island at a complicated intersection with a conservatory, fountain and plenty of room for events. A design for Campus Martius is being prepared by Rundell Ernstberger Associates, of Muncie, Indiana.

Downtown Fort Worth, though busy by day and increasingly lively at night, suffers from an inattention to public space that has resulted in a

familiar scene: buildings that don't generate much life along the street, and wide streets and parking lots that fragment whatever spaces there are. A plan is in the works to string together six left-over scraps of land to make a new city-owned square that will serve government offices, a convention center and a cluster of bus stops where riders transfer among lines. The square will be the focal point for housing, transit, farmer's market and convention-center expansion projects. Through public workshops and an Internet survey, people who work in or visit the area have conveyed an interest in having a lively place with activities, places to eat, and places to relax.

It's not every day that a city resolves to create a civic square right in the center of town. The number of successful new squares created in the last quarter century could probably be counted on one hand, despite the extraordinary expansion of metropolitan areas and more recent resurgence of center cities. Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square and Boston's Post Office Square, both built where parking garages once stood, are the premier examples.

These projects, and others like them, are coming about now because public officials, planners and citizens are starting to understand that public life—meaning active, vital street life—is essential to rebuilding downtowns. Anchor retail stores, public buildings, entertainment zones and downtown housing are only part of the picture; people also need common, sociable, outdoor places, as well as things to do that are not explicitly commercial.

The challenges these squares face are similar. Often, the traffic that passes by them is too fast and the streets that surround them are too wide to create an atmosphere conducive to walking and gathering. Often, the blank walls and vacant lots that surround them are deadly to foot traffic and make people feel the area is unsafe. Civic leaders can still fall victim to designers whose priority is to

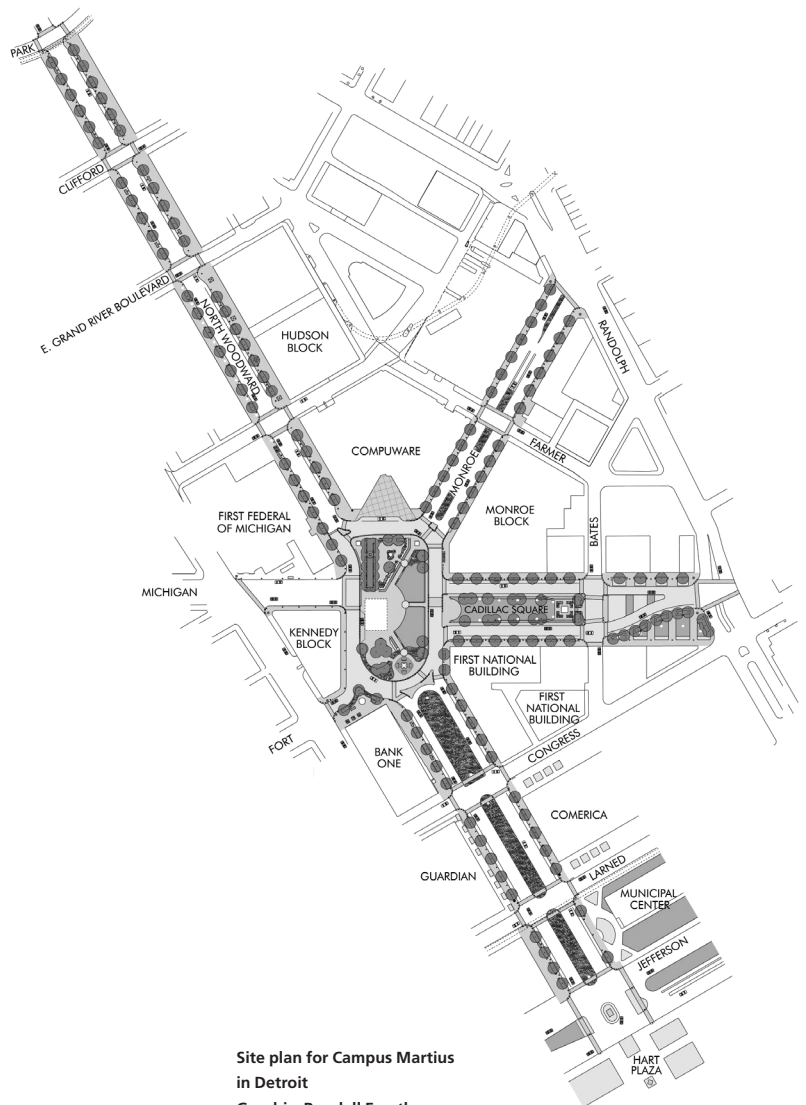
create signature spaces that look good in glossy magazines, rather than designing in support of the myriad and unpredictable uses and activities that make a place truly public. And sustaining a great square takes resolve; even the best places can go to seed if management and maintenance are not given the highest priority.

Only a sustained commitment to a civic vision can overcome obstacles like these. Such a vision might begin with an idea at the top, but the details and creativity so often come from the community. People's ideas for events and concessions, their labor as volunteers and their ability to draw support from various organizations are critical to the success of such projects. This commitment must come from every sector—community groups, merchants associations, public officials, neighborhood leaders, the list goes on. Problem solving needs momentum and consensus to succeed, otherwise the naysayers, those who say “It can't be done,” will win the day.

Some of America's longest-lived public spaces—Santa Fe's Plaza and the greens and commons of so many New England towns—have survived for centuries because they have been able to adapt to the changing times, playing different roles as circumstances change. Their designs are so simple that they can function as blank tablets upon which towns or cities can inscribe their cultural and civic legacy. That is the model new civic squares should emulate: be flexible enough to respond to the various possibilities that exist now and mutable enough to evolve as urban society does over time. That's how a square becomes a place that people return to, day after day, year after year, a place that is so embedded in a city's regular rhythms that no one can remember what it was like before the return of the civic square.



Recent conditions at the site of Campus Martius, a historic square in downtown Detroit that may soon be revived
Photo: Project for Public Spaces



Site plan for Campus Martius in Detroit
Graphic: Rundell Ernstberger Associates