



## Dollar Building: Using Design to Connect and Create Great Public Spaces That Help Transform Underperforming Economies

By Guillermo Lopez, Vice President at Development Design Group

### What Are the Elements That Constitute Great Public Space?

Before examining the relationship between community spaces and economic growth, it is important to identify precisely what constitutes a great public space.



The Project for Public Spaces, a New York City-based nonprofit organization dedicated to the development and maintenance of great public spaces, eloquently and succinctly sums up the critical elements of any successful public

space into four main categories:

- Activities and uses
- Comfort and image
- Access and linkage
- Sociability

A great space is vibrant, comfortable, and accessible. It provides natural landmarks and intuitive pathways and connectors to frame the animation and activity in ways that invite discovery and exploration. Well-designed public spaces skillfully combine intimate nooks with spacious gathering areas; they both stimulate social interaction and allow for private moments and personal reflection.

It may seem obvious, but it is too often overlooked and is the fundamental tenet of community design: great public spaces are for people. Great public spaces attract people, make them comfortable, and give them a reason to stay and return.

### How Can Design Contribute to the Creation of Great Public Spaces?

Simplicity and clarity are two critical design elements for any public space. People do not like to be confused or uncertain. Establish natural landmarks and waypoints to break up the space. Some urban projects use individual city blocks to break up a larger space into manageable and discrete components while still maintaining the long sightlines that unify and define the space. Breaking up a development into linked sections gives visitors a chance to approach the project at their own pace, without feeling overwhelmed, and facilitates that sense of revelation and exploration that we find so satisfying.

Use green space whenever possible. A small park or a row of trees not only softens the architectural landscape but provides a natural gathering place and anchor point. The village green is a phenomenon as old as the village itself, and evoking that ingrained sense of community adds to the comforting perception of permanence and livability.

People like to walk — to move and circulate through a space. Use street grids, wayfinding materials, and structural elements to create broad frameworks that encourage movement and interaction. Clearly defined starting and ending points, be they traditional anchors or strategically positioned elements like fountains or plazas, provide needed structure and spatial context. A seemingly endless expanse of storefronts or entertainment options can actually be too much of a good thing, creating what can feel like a daunting challenge and discouraging casual visits.

Mix it up. While it behooves design architects and developers to be sensible in their merchandising mixes and architectural styles — no one thinks a Dollar Store adjacent to Tiffany's or a thatched roof on a contemporary frame makes much sense — there is an inherent energy and excitement in the juxtaposition of differing styles and the availability of a wide range of products, services, and entertainment options.

### How Does That Space Work to Boost an Underperforming Economy?

Quality design can overcome a host of seemingly prohibitive obstacles. Even in some of the most downtrodden and economically disadvantaged parts of the world, a well-designed public space can be commercially viable and provide a dramatic boost to struggling local and regional economies.

Plaza San Marino, a shopping and entertainment development that opened in 2003 in Guayaquil, Ecuador, clearly illustrates this mechanism in action. The new commercial and social hub for Guayaquil, San Marino features upscale fashion franchises, home furnishings outlets, a bookstore-cafe, and a Tower



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Records store as well as dining and upscale entertainment options that include a state-of-the-art 12-plex cinema with stadium seating. The combination of an enclosed galleria with the surrounding outdoor elements of an open leisure center blends tenets of modern town and lifestyle center architecture with the handcrafted detail and stylistic influences of distinctive South American design.

Many of the materials used to build the center were locally crafted. Local artisans hand-carved much of the center's concrete. Iron for the detailed handrails was cast on-site. Details throughout the space represent reproductions of existing architectural elements of the city, such as cast iron lamps, posts, kiosks, wrought iron railings, hand-painted mosaic tiles, and faithful reproductions of traditional marble and stone details. An iconic, 110-foot bell and clock tower is the landmark feature, giving San Marino a distinctive and instantly recognizable public face. Towers and cupolas, clay roof tiles, and stuccoed, plaster-finished walls lend regional flavor, and intricate Gustave Eiffel-inspired ironwork and bold lighting elements provide eye-catching structural highlights.

San Marino's economic benefits to the surrounding Guayaquil community are far-reaching. The project has generated an increased revenue stream through tourist and visitor dollars, facilitated access to world-class facilities, and created a community destination and regional landmark of exceptional quality. The project has fostered a sense of civic pride, local and regional identity, national and international recognition, an affirmation of local history and culture, and a sense of connection and identification with global development and the modern economy.

San Marino has become an icon for the city of Guayaquil — the place where locals want to be and where visitors want to have

their picture taken. The project has brought contemporary flair and excitement to an environment that has traditionally been viewed as uninviting, perhaps impossibly so. In fact, rather than simply overcoming complex sociological and demographic hurdles, San Marino has embraced those hurdles, incorporating them into the fabric of its design and the spirit of its finished product. The results are impressive: in a country where 70% of the population lives below the poverty level and per capita gross domestic product is \$3,200, San Marino posts close to \$300 in sales per square foot and sees about 800,000 visitors a month.

The future is bright for our public spaces. As more and more cities, towns, and developers begin to appreciate the impact that well-designed public spaces can have on their communities — and their wallets — the more this encouraging trend will become a self-propagating phenomenon. As we move away from the mentality of trying to squeeze out every last square foot of available leasable space and towards a place where the true economic benefits of great architectural design are recognized and embraced, we are increasing our quality of life along with the quality of our public spaces.

### About the Author

Guillermo Lopez is a vice president with Baltimore-based Development Design Group Inc., an innovative architecture, planning, and design firm with a history of creating high-profile, high-quality environments around the world. The company's impressive international portfolio includes exciting new retail and entertainment concepts; first-class hotel, leisure, and resort facilities; unique office and residential designs; and large mixed-use destinations offering a range of elements and activities.

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