

The Importance of Civic Space

Keel Hunt
President, The Strategy Group

Over the history of our city, the most important public projects have been attempts to give Nashvillians engaging, stimulating and safe places to come together.

From greenway to stadium, from community center to concert hall, from sidewalks to schools to the Sportsplex, the city's leaders have grasped the wisdom of providing Nashvillians with inviting and welcoming spaces to meet for education, enlightenment, conversation, entertainment, and the simple enjoyment of unstructured leisure time.

As a native Nashvillian, I have observed that we learn about our community first and best through the "civic spaces" we experience in the city. I grew up spending summer days on the baseball diamonds of Shelby Park, feeding the ducks in Watauga Lake on Sunday afternoons with my Mom and Dad, shopping at the Farmers' Market with my grandfather, and watching local democracy unfold at the county courthouse.

Each venue served its own programmatic objectives, but what happened in them all was the building of community. We all work out our own sense of the community in these mundane but essential ways. People come together to meet and know their neighbors.

We see this phenomenon at work in other cities. The pocket parks of Washington, D.C., and Chicago's Civic Center -- with its broad Richard J. Daley Plaza and Picasso sculpture -- enrich human interaction in busy urban places.

In our town, in 1993, in a process similar to the Plan of Nashville exercise, several thousand citizens participated in the city-wide goal-setting called Nashville's Agenda. They identified 21 goals for the future to make our city "the best it can be." An ambitious goal for the arts was for Nashville to be "a cultural center with excellent facilities for the visual and performing arts and diverse opportunities accessible to all Nashvillians and visitors alike."

Eleven years later, much progress has been made -- with the advent of the Frist Center, Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum, and the emerging Schermerhorn Symphony Center -- and all share the notion of providing civic space.

The symphony hall project leaders considered 22 different sites and selected the old Haymarket Square in the central city for its accessibility and potential for synergy with other activities in the neighborhood. A hundred years earlier, the Haymarket itself was a civic space where Nashvillians sold hay, bought horses, heard speeches, and no doubt shared the news of the day.

While the new concert hall will provide world-class acoustics for the enjoyment of music, it was also designed to enhance the day-to-day human activity in the area. The entrances oriented to the west will contribute to more daytime activity in the park across Fourth Avenue. Programmatically, the new center will be convenient for children in art and music classes at the Frist Center and Hall of Fame buildings.

These spectacular new venues will introduce more humanity to the central city, and that is a good thing. In my lifetime, the awakening area south of Broadway has been transformed from "a place nobody goes" to a network of vibrant civic spaces -- all drawing more Nashvillians to a greater sense of community.

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