

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE (WORKING SESSION) MAY 25, 2009

PUBLIC SQUARES (PLACEMAKING AND CITY BUILDING) PRESENTATION FILE #15.110

Recommendation

The Commissioner of Planning recommends:

THAT staff and the City's consultants for the New Official Plan, Urban Strategies Inc. make public spaces a prominent focus of the Official Plan Review.

Economic Impact

There are no requirements for new funding associated with this report, although the implementation of next steps may require an adjustment to the public space funding models.

Communications Plan

Discussions regarding public space will be an ongoing aspect of the New Official Plan and the Focused Area Study initiatives and as such the communication strategies for these projects will cover this topic.

Purpose

In response to a request made by the Official Plan Review Committee on March 10, 2009, the report outlines a preliminary strategy for the creation of public squares in the City of Vaughan. Public squares are a linchpin component that integrates the three main drivers of the Official Plan Review process - 'Placemaking,' 'City Building' and 'Sustainability.' The three key drivers provide overall direction and serve as the basis for the policies of the Official Plan. The enhancement of the public realm, of which public squares are an integral part, is essential in contributing to the transformation outlined by the Vaughan Tomorrow New Official Plan Process.

Background - Analysis and Options

Vaughan is transforming into a more urban City in its own right from a collection of residential and employment areas and historic villages. The City is now at a stage in its evolution where City building and placemaking go hand in hand.

With this change and growing civic consciousness come new imperatives for City-wide initiatives towards creating a high quality public environment with unique and memorable places for people that foster a stronger sense of civic belonging.

The invigoration of the public realm also promotes pedestrian-friendly, transit-supportive growth that is a catalyst for re-urbanization, intensification and sustainability.

City Squares Through History

Starting with the Western world's Greek agora and Roman forum, the public square has been at the centre of great cities and great civilizations for most of recorded history. Squares serve the essential human need for face-to-face interaction, commerce, trade as well as a stage for cultural events.

At the end of the Dark Ages during Medieval times, cities began to flourish at the juncture of key trade routes. These junctures were enlarged into squares, which became the centres of social,

cultural and economic life and the City evolved organically around them. During the Renaissance and Baroque period the design of squares became formalized using new artistic techniques of perspective. Landmark buildings such as churches, City halls and elegant residences enclosed their edges and anchored the square at the physical centre of the City.

Early North American towns that evolved with the horse and buggy developed formal town greens or commons such as the small, neighbourhood squares of Savannah Georgia or the Boston Common. The French laid out Lafayette Square in New Orleans, which has survived to this day. Thomas Jefferson hired the French architect L'Enfant to lay out grandiose avenues, squares and malls for Washington D.C, but these were largely an anomaly in the morphology of American towns.

The tradition of the grand pedestrian civic or market square did not permanently take root on the North American urban landscape. North American cities were primarily shaped by the Industrial Era and rapidly expanding cities were predominantly laid out on a grid to facilitate development and outward expansion with little sentimental attachment to public spaces during subsequent waves of redevelopment. San Francisco's Union Square, which was the world's first square with an underground parking garage, managed to buck this trend by reinventing itself many times while maintaining its status as a fixture of that City's urban landscape for the last two hundred years.

It was not until the City Beautiful Movement when the design of spaces in North America, albeit mostly for the automobile, was given a deliberate Beaux Arts and classical grandeur to impart a sense of harmonious order on the urban landscape. Toronto's grand University Avenue was inspired by this movement, but was the only vestige of a larger vision that never got built.

The modernist ideas of Le Corbusier found their expression during the post-war boom when the ubiquitous highway gutted the inner City and began to scatter people thinly over a larger urban landscape and housing projects relocated people from ghettos into placeless complexes. Traditional pedestrian and transit-oriented urban forms and architecture were rejected to serve the imperatives of the automobile and rapid suburbanization, effectively dissolving public spaces and causing social dislocation.

The public square returned as a pedestrian entity during the late Modern movement. Nathan Phillip's Square in Toronto, with its colonnade inspired by the Greek agora's peristyle, and numerous new plazas such as Boston's City Hall Plaza, the Portland Open Space Sequence (Lovejoy Fountain) and San Francisco's iconic Embarcadero Plaza, marked a tentative resurgence of civic life and reclamation of the public realm. They enjoyed varying degrees of success from a lack of understanding of their underlying dynamics.

During the postmodern period starting in the mid 1970's, there was a somewhat superficial attempt to reclaim some traditional City forms, public spaces and architectural design principles. However, without an understanding of the ecology of the public square, the planning regime, density, land uses, pedestrian and transit transportation networks needed to support it, projects such as Charles Moore's trend-setting Piazza D'Italia soon fell into disuse and disrepair.

In response to the social dislocation, declining health, low levels of civic engagement and placelessness caused by suburban sprawl and an automobile-oriented concept of urban development, the New Urbanism movement sought to understand and recreate the underlying ecology of the public square that combined the disciplines of Urban Design and Planning.

Typologies

To support this important trend and building on such classic works as Camillo Sitte's 'The Art of Building Cities' and Jan Gehl's 'New City Spaces' to name a few, a growing body of knowledge on the subject of public squares began to grow to deepen the understanding of the anatomy and

dynamics of public squares. Notable books including 'Public Spaces and Urban Spaces,' 'Public Life in Urban Places' and 'New City Spaces' analyzed the workings of the public realm and underscored the need to understand the ecology of public spaces, their taxonomy and to fit the space into its context. The monumental square, the traffic square, main City square, civic cove and forecourt became part of the urban planner's and designer's lexicon.

Characteristics

Christopher Alexander's seminal work 'A Pattern Language' and Jane Jacob's 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities,' to name relatively recent works, attempted to dissect the anatomy of design and planning of successful public spaces. A slew of new companies have sprung up over the last decade such as Project for Public Spaces - recently hired by the City of Mississauga - to apply a comprehensive approach to public spaces. Concepts such as enclosure, focal point and programming became part of the nomenclature of public space design.

Trends and Evolution

Over the past decade in particular, many older European cities such as Lyons, Rome and Warsaw have begun to reclaim more of their public realm while younger cities in North America such as Toronto, Mississauga and Waterloo are creating new squares from scratch.

Case Studies

A number of recent case studies are instructive to the Vaughan context and present opportunities. Spurred on by a community initiative, the City of Toronto began to carve Dundas Square out from a derelict area at Yonge and Dundas Streets. The local councilor hired Ron Sesconi, the planning consultant who was involved in creation of Battery City Park in New York and Canary Wharf for Olympia and York in London to lead. The primary objective was to recreate sense of space in this area long overshadowed by the inward-looking Eaton Centre. An Official Plan and Zoning Amendment was prepared and the City began to assemble land; however, not all of the necessary parcels could be obtained this way. Therefore a Community Improvement Area was created under Section 28 of the Planning Act which enabled the City to acquire land and hence initiated proceedings under Expropriation Act. The landowners appealed to the Ontario Municipal Board; however the Board ruled in favour of the City in June 1998. An RFP was prepared for the design of the square itself whereas the underground parking was built and managed by the Toronto Parking Authority. The winning design by Brown & Storey Architects was built. A Request for Qualifications led to the sale of lands on the north side of square to PennEquity where lively uses were envisioned to inject life into the square. The proceeds from this sale paid for the square construction. Land acquisition, design and construction of the square was financed and carried out as one capital project. The square is run by Board of Management consisting of the local Business Improvement Area, the City of Toronto and the community organizations, which are in charge of marketing and programming.

The City of Waterloo began the metamorphosis of a City-owned parking lot in front of a parking lot into Uptown Waterloo Square ten years ago. Initially businesses balked at the loss of 66 surface parking spaces even though other parking sites were created within 2 minutes walk and a parking structure was built. The City studied the most suitable locations and established criteria for size, location and design, and as a result the Uptown Waterloo site was chosen. A business case was prepared to highlight the costs versus benefits and a two-part RFP was issued for both Planning and Design. The project manager attributes the successful creation of the square in part to a decision to enlist the renowned Project for Public Spaces group for a one day presentation to sell the City, residents and businesses on the idea of creating a public square. Given the groups' credibility and neutrality, the tide was turned in favour of the square's creation and once enough consensus was built, Council endorsed the second phase of the RFP for the design. The construction of the square was paid for through taxes and debentures and the final phase of design will be eligible for federal infrastructure money. Since the construction of the square, the

new higher end businesses have moved in while some businesses who failed to adapt moved away. An LRT through the area is now being planned.

The City of Kingston reclaimed a former parking lot at the rear of their City Hall within an area with dense urban fabric and historic buildings. An historic square once existed here that was used as farmers' market and gathering place, which over time became disused and became a parking lot. The City sought to reclaim the public square as part of downtown revitalization and established a BIA and Downtown Action Plan to that end. The square encountered strong opposition due to the loss of parking. The development of the square was co-coordinated with replacement of storm, sanitary and electrical infrastructure and pedestrianization of the downtown. A fountain, skating rink, new lighting, benches are proposed to eventually enhance and support year-round uses. A Marketing and Programming Plan has already attracted events and tourists who have helped revitalize the downtown, even during winter months. As a result, the loss of vehicular traffic has been more than made up for with significantly more pedestrian traffic. The success of the square is now attracting private sponsorships and donations that account for 75% of its operating budget. More importantly, the revitalized pedestrian realm is attracting new developments and renovations.

Similar to Kingston, the City of Stratford is at the early stages of creating a downtown square on land owned by the City to the rear of City Hall. This measure is aimed at revitalizing the downtown that has been degraded by retail fleeing to outlying areas and power centres. Many downtown buildings having vacant upper floors. The Stratford City Centre Committee has initiated a public engagement process to develop a vision of Market Square and has concluded that it could become a focal point of downtown revitalization. The Market Square Advisory Committee prepared the Design Competition Guidelines for the recent design RFP won by PLANT Architect. The City has recently commenced an impact analysis including cost analysis, parking impact as well as a programming and business plan to support its development.

Planning Tools

Vaughan can learn from these case studies that to create successful public square critical steps must include: stakeholder engagement; studies that provide direction as to location and size; the creation of a supportive planning framework; and a proactive marketing plan.

All stakeholders including ratepayers and landowners should be engaged in a process of negotiation and discussion from the outset to make sure the many benefits of creating a stronger pedestrian realm are understood.

The experience of our sister cities and organizations such as Project for Public Spaces can be used to build support in a non-partisan way. The establishment of a City Squares Committee with an ongoing mandate to initiate and oversee the process and engage public/landowners may also be helpful.

Under the Planning Act the City has specific tools at its disposal to promote this process. For example, where public squares or public realm amenities are created as part of a redevelopment, Section 37 of Planning Act may be used to provide a density bonus incentive. Section 37 permits the City to authorize increases in permitted height and/or density through the zoning bylaw in return for community benefits, provided that there are related Official Plan policies in place.

In addition, Section 28 of the Planning Act allows municipalities with policies in their official plans for community improvement to designate by by-law a "community improvement project area" (CIP). Criteria include dilapidation, faulty arrangement or any other environmental, social or community economic development reason. Once a CIP has come into effect, the municipality may acquire land.

An initial review of City-owned land may yield possible sites that could avoid any protracted legal difficulties.

Based on the findings of the current Parking Review Standards Study, reduced parking ratios could free up surplus lands for public squares and promote redevelopment of existing sites in designated growth centres that are ripe for intensification. Possible sites include Vaughan City Centre and Vaughan Corporate Centre both having large areas of underused parking. Other areas include Market Lane in the Woodbridge core.

Planning and Design Process

Since Vaughan is now engaged in the Official Plan review process, the time is opportune to incorporate broad policy underpinnings for the creation of public squares tied to 'Placemaking,' which has been identified as a key driver of transformation. Other initiatives associated with the Official Plan Review, such as the Transportation Master Plan Study and the "Active Together" Master Plan for Parks, Recreation, Culture and Libraries should be coordinated to foster the development of public squares as part of a hierarchy of parks and open spaces.

An assessment of the inventory of City-owned land or existing parks in urban areas may reveal opportunities for the creation of public squares in association with future libraries, community centres and other such generators of activity.

Once the planning framework is in place, a business case/financial model will need to be developed to identify costs and benefits of creating a square in a specific location along with a financial model to identify operating costs, capital costs, potential sources of revenue generated by the square. This work can be explored as an outcome of the New Official Plan. Marketing and Programming Plans have helped to establish squares in the civic consciousness and promote their long term economic viability.

Next Steps

The findings of this report will be incorporated into the Official Plan Review Process. Urban Strategies, the main consultant for Vaughan's Official Plan Review will base demonstration site work on the aforementioned findings in order to illustrate how and where public squares can be realized. Furthermore, it is within the Official Plan Review scope of work, consistent with the 'Placemaking' theme, to provide direction on suitable locations, size and typologies for public squares as central nodes around which future growth centres and growth patterns in Vaughan may revolve.

Relationship to Vaughan Vision 2020

This report is consistent with the priorities set forth in Vaughan Vision 2020, particularly "Plan & Manage Growth & Economic Vitality," "Lead & Promote Environmental Sustainability," and "Preserve our Heritage & Support Diversity, Arts & Culture."

Regional Implications

This initiative is consistent with Region of York Official Plan (June 1, 2008) with respect to creating healthy, culturally vibrant communities that are safe, attractive, pedestrian-friendly and transit supportive.

Conclusion

City squares will not only serve as a catalyst for re-urbanization of Vaughan into a more compact, inherently sustainable urban form but also create the places that engender a sense of place and community and generate the cultural and economic synergies that will herald the next stage of

Vaughan's evolution as a place to live, work and play. The Official Plan Review process provides an opportunity to integrate a process, planning and funding mechanism to realize these squares and the dream of Vaughan as a 'City of Squares.' City Staff and the City's consultants for the New Official Plan will make public squares and spaces a prominent focus of the New Official Plan Process.

This report has been prepared with reference to a number of different texts. Further information can be found in the following:

- 'The Art of Building Cities' by Camillo Sitte
- 'New City Spaces' by Jan Gehl & Lars Gemzoe
- 'Squares – A Public Design Guide for Urbanists' by Mark C. Childs
- 'Great Streets' by Allan B. Jacobs
- 'Genius of the European Square' by Suzanne H. Crowhurst Lennard, Henry L. Lennard
- 'Public Life in Urban Places' by Suzanne H. Crowhurst Lennard, Henry L. Lennard
- 'Public Places - Urban Spaces' by Matthew Carmona
- 'Design of Cities' by Edmund N. Bacon
- 'History of Urban Form – Before the Industrial Revolutions' by A.E.J. Morris
- 'Preserving Modern Landscape Architecture – Papers from the Wave Hill – National Park Service Conference' Edited by Charles A. Birnbaum
- 'A Pattern Language' by Christopher Alexander
- 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities' by Jane Jacobs
- 'The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces' by William H. Whyte
- 'The Politics of Public Space' by Setha Low and Neil Smith

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