



Fort Worth: Building a Civic Square

Stories about the revival of neglected urban plazas, parks and open spaces are increasingly common these days. From New York's Bryant Park to Oakland's Lafayette Square, American cities are learning the art and craft of nursing public spaces back to life.

But what city would be audacious enough to create a brand new civic square? Try Fort Worth, Texas, where city planners, civic leaders and businesses are cobbling together a small historic park, several little-used open spaces, a parking lot and vacated streets to create a new central place.

The U.S. General Services Administration, whose Fritz G. Lanham Federal Building faces the would-be square, has enthusiastically embraced the project in hope of creating a more amenable setting for federal workers and visitors to the building. GSA helped provide planning consultants in the early stages of the process and is now planning to reconstruct the section of the park that fronts the federal building.

Above: Interim improvements to the plaza adjacent to Fritz G. Lanham Federal Building.
Courtesy City of Fort Worth Planning Department.

**A Field Report from the
GSA Center for Urban
Development**



Left: Aerial view of site

Center: Montage of existing conditions, with the Fritz G. Lanham Federal Building to the left

Photos: City of Fort Worth Planning Department

In fact, GSA's involvement was a "lifeline" during the formative stages of the project, city planner Mike Brennan said. Although the idea won public support, the city was slow to commit resources to it, as thorny questions about parking, property acquisition, design and management—and how to pay for it all—were worked out. Now GSA's leadership role in building the park is inspiring participation from other nearby property owners.

Conceiving a Civic Square

Building a civic square is no easy task, especially in Fort Worth. The city's torrid summer heat and reliance on cars have contributed to a lack of a strong urban public space tradition; in fact, if you ask a local resident to name the city's best downtown public space, they are likely to mention Sundance Square, an entertainment zone whose main open space is a parking lot (albeit one that occasionally hosts farmers' markers and concerts).

The notion of creating a civic square emerged in summer, 1999, during discussions about a downtown bus transfer station. Project for Public Spaces' Fred Kent, consulting with the "T," Fort Worth's transit agency, suggested the city would do better by arraying bus stops along the streets near city hall and the federal building, creating bursts of pedestrian activity as people transferred between lines.

Kent then suggested that the jumble of spaces and streets in the area could be redesigned as a new public space, a "civic square" for bus riders, government workers and convention-goers alike. All the area needed was modest improvements to the spaces and streets, better connections

between the buildings and the spaces they front, and simple programming strategies.

Fort Worth was ready for such a suggestion. City leaders were happily watching the success of Sundance Square, which offered nightly proof that lively pedestrian street life could take hold in Fort Worth. Meanwhile, downtown still had a dearth of open space, and even though the city was shepherding through large civic improvements at the south end of downtown, they somehow seemed to lack a center of gravity. City staff, aware of GSA's desire to work more closely with communities, asked the agency's Center for Urban Development for help.

GSA was ready, too. "There was virtually no hesitation on our part. We saw that this was an opportunity to do something that would benefit GSA and Fort Worth, and would be a good match with our First Impressions and urban livability programs," said Harold Hebert, asset manager for GSA's Greater Southwest Region.

The civic square, now called Hyde Park, occupies a seemingly unlikely place. It is a few blocks from the most active part of downtown, in an area dominated by government and institutional facilities. Two busy streets cross the site, while smaller streets and vacated streets connect in at angles. One corner is occupied by the federal building and a city courthouse; another by city hall and the local cathedral; a third by a telephone company building, a motel and a historic, but vacant, office building.

The area seems dormant, but it has some underlying strengths that may allow it to evolve as a daytime activity center that complements night-oriented Sundance Square. Some five thousand people work in the buildings facing

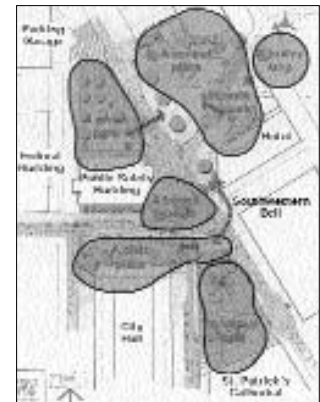
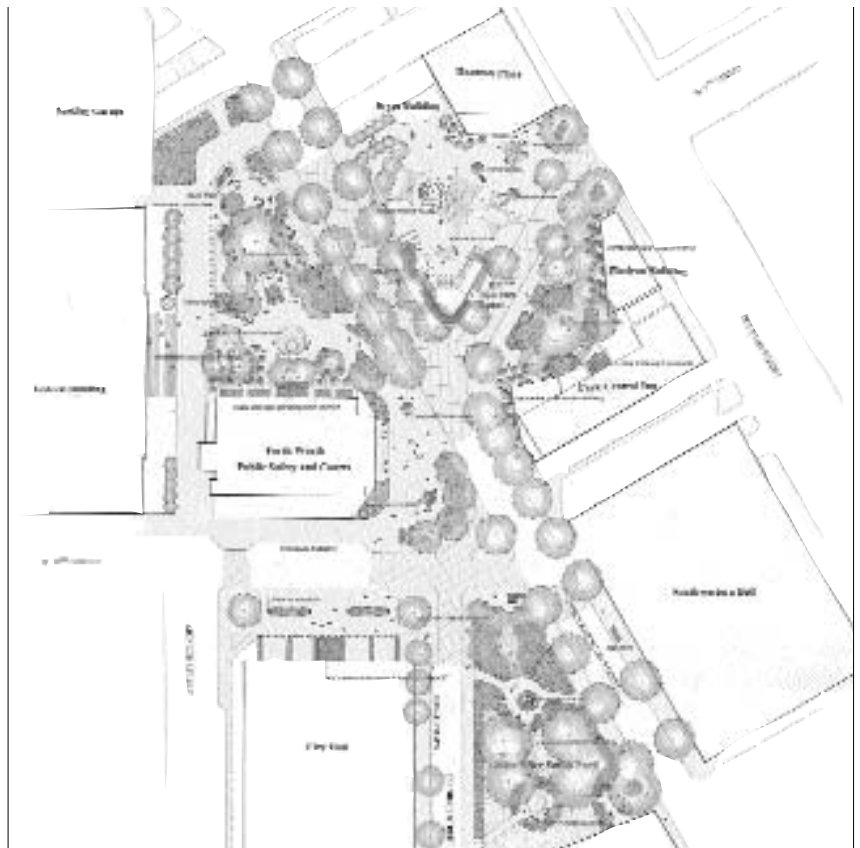


Hyde Park, most of them federal workers, and Fort Worth's convention center, which currently hosts gatherings of up to 10,000 people, is merely a block away. Most significantly, the corner of Hyde Park that now exists is a remnant Fort Worth's oldest public park, which functioned a century ago as a civic place.

Moreover, some \$100 million public projects, intended to jump-start the area, are already planned or in construction. A nearby interstate highway is being relocated, making room for a new boulevard and mixed-use development. The convention center is being expanded and Fort Worth's Water Gardens, a landscape architecture landmark, is being retrofitted to be more welcoming. An intermodal transportation center with rail service to Dallas and a public market is under way.

By September, 1999, city planners had convened a focus group of stakeholders in the project—including staff from city government, GSA, the T and Downtown Fort Worth, Inc., (a business alliance)—to draft a plan. GSA's decision to sign on was easy: "If we can have quality places for eating, shopping or recreation, it helps us in terms of customer satisfaction and in recruiting and retaining employees," said Hebert. "We have vacant space in this building, and the type of improvements we're talking about will make it easier for us to find tenants."

That fall, the city launched an outreach program to gather ideas—sending out surveys via e-mail to workers in City Hall and the federal building, setting up mobile displays in the area, and holding a public forum that drew some 200 participants. In December, 1999, the city council and mayor expressed support for exploring the idea further. "We had proof of



widespread support because of all this participation," Brennan explained.

Demonstrating Civic Leadership

Since then, the focus group has been working to resolve outstanding issues, such as the impact of the scheme on bus service, traffic and parking; site acquisition and development problems; and maintenance and programming strategies. Underlying all these matters is money—not only where funds will come from, but also whether the project will have enough positive impact to justify the public investment.

Because of these concerns, perhaps, the city approached the project cautiously at first. In fact, despite the council's endorsement, in

Conceptual site plan (top), movement diagram (above left) and spatial pattern (above right) for Hyde Park
 Courtesy: Project for Public Spaces



The Main Street Arts Festival, held two blocks east of Hyde Park, is one of downtown's most successful public events. Hyde park will be an importance connection between established entertainment areas to the north and emerging redevelopment areas to the south.
Courtesy Downtown Fort Worth

early 2000 “this project was on life support,” Brennan said. “People were skeptical about whether it was worth spending time on.”

Throughout the year, planning staff coordinated the focus group, set up a web page, and studied questions of assembling the land, paying for construction and managing the space, but the city committed no funds for planning and design consultants, construction or programming. GSA's support—small investments that will encourage others to take actions beneficial to both GSA's business interests and the city at large—was thus critical to the project's survival:

- Early on, GSA's commitment to the project, especially the Center for Urban Development's involvement, provided an important political boost. “The more we were able to say GSA was using Fort Worth as a model, the more people started listening,” Brennan said.

- The Center for Urban Development has supported PPS's continued involvement in the project, through a general consulting arrangement. PPS staff attend focus group and design review meetings, and helped draft concept and phasing plans for the civic square.

By spring, 2001, the project was coming into focus. The city council approved a conceptual plan for the acquisition, design, phasing and management of the park. And GSA assumed a leadership role: It plans to redesign and reconstruct a barren, city-owned parcel at the entrance of the federal building—the first new section of Hyde Park that will be built. Design work, by Dallas-based Design Associates International, is underway, and GSA will pay for

the improvements through its “First Impressions” program.

Early plans for Federal Plaza call for a stage and seating area where small ceremonies or performances could occur, water features, space for a food vendor and green areas. While city guidelines provide a basic framework for the park design, GSA is cooperating with the owner of a park parcel across the street to ensure that the design features will be complementary and that there will be visual cohesion between the different areas of Hyde Park.

In June, 2001, Fort Worth's City Council unanimously approved a license agreement with GSA, which will allow GSA to proceed with design and construction. The next matter to resolve is who will manage and program the space: Since GSA is not authorized to shoulder those responsibilities itself, the goal is to contract with a local partner, perhaps Downtown Fort Worth, which provides such services elsewhere in the city center. GSA is also seeking partners to contribute seating, landscaping, art work and other features that will contribute to the atmosphere of Federal Plaza.

GSA has approached the project so far with patience, persistence and a willingness to be creative with its resources. The outcome, regional staff hope, will include enhanced marketability of space in the Lanham Building, improved customer satisfaction and increased employee productivity. GSA, which has occupied the site for some three decades, also hopes its can support the city's long-term development and livability goals: “Over the 30 years I've worked here, we've had a steady loss of those amenities that make an area a good place to be—restaurants, retail, clothing stores, banks, movie theatres,” said Hebert. “We are keenly aware of what's no longer here, and that's one reason we are happy to work with the city on this process.”

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Urban Development/
Good Neighbor Program
U.S. General Services
Administration
Office of the Chief Architect
1800 F St., NW, Room 3341
Washington, D.C. 20405
202-501-1881
www.gsa.gov/goodneighbor