



# **City of Vancouver** *Land Use and Development Policies and Guidelines*

## **Planning, Urban Design and Sustainability Department**

453 West 12th Avenue, Vancouver, BC V5Y 1V4 | tel: 3-1-1, outside Vancouver 604.873.7000 | fax: 604.873.7100  
website: [vancouver.ca](http://vancouver.ca) | email: [planning@vancouver.ca](mailto:planning@vancouver.ca) | app: VanConnect

# **PLAZA DESIGN GUIDELINES**

*Adopted by City Council on November 17, 1992*

*Amended July 20, 2022*



# Contents

|  | Page     |
|--|----------|
| <b>1 Application and Intent .....</b>      | <b>1</b> |
| <b>2 Context.....</b>                      | <b>1</b> |
| 2.1 Use and Concept.....                   | 1        |
| 2.2 Visibility and Views.....              | 2        |
| 2.3 Linkages.....                          | 3        |
| <b>3 Safety .....</b>                      | <b>4</b> |
| 3.1 Design.....                            | 4        |
| 3.2 Accessibility .....                    | 4        |
| 3.3 Defensible Space .....                 | 5        |
| 3.4 Lighting and Public Features .....     | 5        |
| <b>4 Environment .....</b>                 | <b>6</b> |
| 4.1 Sunlight.....                          | 6        |
| 4.2 Wind .....                             | 7        |
| 4.3 Noise.....                             | 8        |
| 4.4 Weather Protection.....                | 9        |
| 4.5 Environmentally Sensitive Design ..... | 9        |
| <b>5 User Attractions .....</b>            | <b>9</b> |
| 5.1 Seating .....                          | 9        |
| 5.2 Activity Generators.....               | 11       |
| 5.3 Amenities.....                         | 12       |
| 5.4 Natural Elements .....                 | 12       |
| 5.5 Detailing and Materials .....          | 13       |
| 5.6 Spatial Variety.....                   | 14       |
| 5.7 Good Management .....                  | 14       |

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:** The guidelines were prepared by Larry Diamond Landscape Architects in consultation with Planning and Social Planning Departments staff.

## **1 Application and Intent**

These guidelines are to be used in the assessment of development applications in the following zoning districts: DD, CWD, BCPED, FCCDD, FC-1, DEOD, C-2 and C-3A.

They should assist developers and consultants to establish a design rationale and to create improved open spaces associated with new projects.

While not intended for rigid application, the guidelines featured in this document highlight important considerations which, when appropriately selected and interpreted, can result in safe and useful outdoor places which add economic and amenity value to a project.

A plaza is an open space designed for public use and defined by surrounding buildings and/or streets. Its primary functions are to encourage a diversity of opportunities for social interaction and activities, to provide relief and relaxation, to expand and reinforce the public realm and to contribute to the liveability and general amenity of the downtown and other developing parts of the city.

Historically, plazas have been central to the development of urban centres. Examples such as European squares and piazzas have afforded citizens places to meet, trade and celebrate. In a modern changing city such as Vancouver, it is also essential that plazas have a purpose and are not merely leftover areas between buildings. As the city grows, opportunities are presented through new development to provide open spaces that offer delight, surprise, rest, enlightenment and amusement for a wide variety of users over the course of the day, week and year. Activities accommodated by public plazas such as socializing, resting, eating, bus waiting, exhibitions and open air markets add to the quality of city living and working, enhancing diversity and increasing the educational and cultural opportunities that define the positive experience of urban living.

## **2 Context**

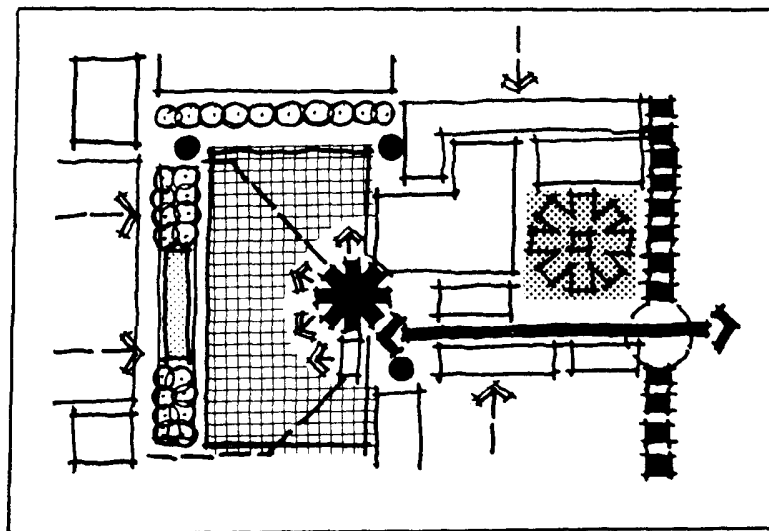
### **2.1 Use and Concept**

Like a successful building, a plaza requires a program of use and a strong concept. Therefore, careful thought should be given to a plaza's principal functions and to its relationship with the adjacent public realm (i.e. streets, pedestrian routes, other open spaces), activities and architecture. While some plazas may act primarily as pedestrian nodes, others function best as important viewpoints or enhance the setting for a building.

A plaza should also reflect and reinforce the character of its location. For example, the purpose and nature of a plaza on Robson Street may differ significantly from one on Georgia Street. Within

an area of the city, an individual plaza may function best as part of a hierarchy of open spaces, some small, others grand, still others as links within an open space network. Therefore, an understanding of area objectives, existing plazas and pedestrian movement, building and street scale, materials and circulation patterns are all essential in developing a use program and overall concept.

**Figure 1. A Plaza's Proposed Uses, Functions and Linkages Should Be Determined as Part of the Overall Project Design Process**



## 2.2 Visibility and Views

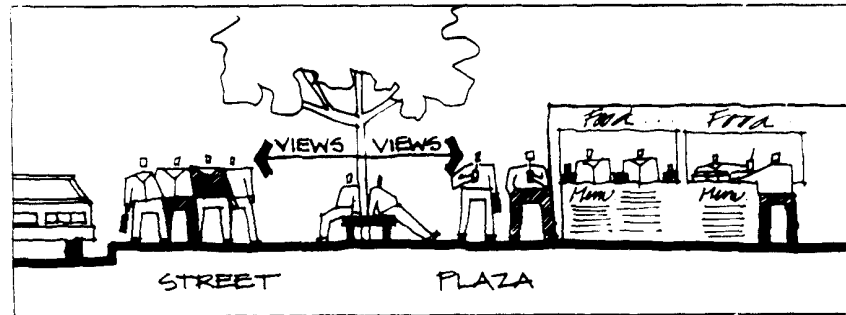
Good street-to-plaza visibility announces the plaza's internal attractions. It signifies that it is a public space, it permits users to watch street activity and it makes the space safer.

Good visibility can be achieved by the following:

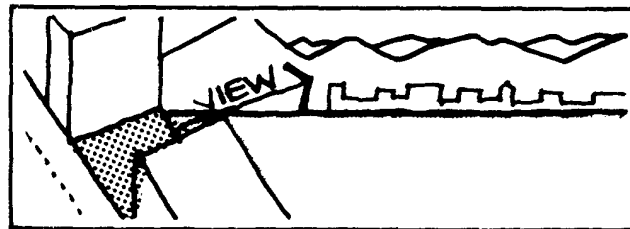
- arranging any walls and planting to not screen or block off the plaza from the street;
- locating the plaza at or as close as possible to street level, preferably no more than 1.0 m above or below street level.

A plaza should also take advantage of distant views to the mountains, ocean and other landmarks wherever possible.

**Figure 2. Good Street-to-Plaza Visibility Should Announce the Plaza's Internal Attractions**



**Figure 3. Plazas Should Take Advantage of Views**



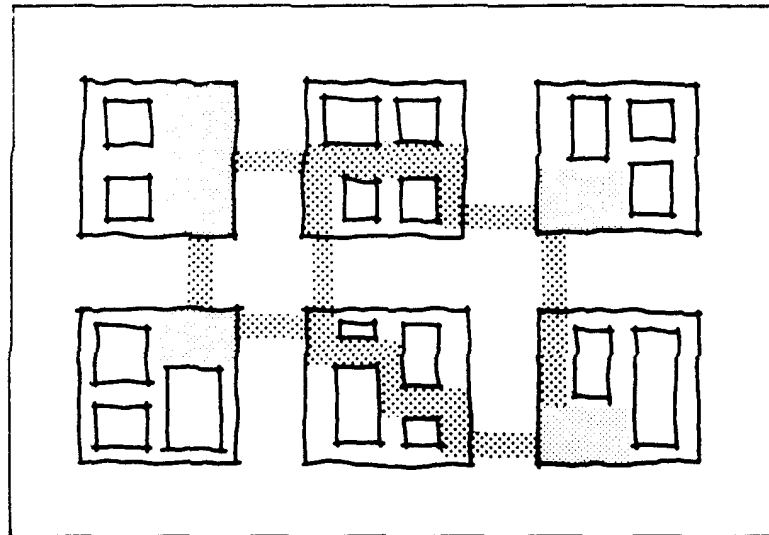
### **2.3 Linkages**

A plaza should be linked to other surrounding open spaces, as well as interior spaces such as lobbies, to create a dynamic pedestrian network. Such links will make the plaza more useful and provide a more dynamic, coherent urban environment.

Linkages can be achieved or reinforced using the following devices:

- passages;
- bridges;
- steps/ramps;
- paving patterns;
- planting.

**Figure 4. Plaza Linkages Should Be Created to Achieve a Coherent Pedestrian Network**



### **3 Safety**

#### **3.1 Design**

A plaza will be unsuccessful if it is not well used because of a perception of unsafeness.

The design of a plaza should provide for safety. Regard should be given to principles of designing for safety such as defensible space, clear sightlines, good lighting and provision of alternate "escape" paths.

The differences in usage, ownership and responsibilities among commercial, commercial/residential and residential plazas should be recognized, so that the different approaches to their design relative to urban safety is addressed at the initial planning stages. For example, zones of responsibility should be established and delineated in the design of these plaza types, taking into account their respective use patterns.

#### **3.2 Accessibility**

A plaza should provide easy and direct access particularly for the elderly, disabled and young children. Ramp slopes should not exceed 8.3% and handrails should be incorporated.

Selection of surface materials should result in easy access for the elderly and disabled, and also discourage incompatible plaza activities such as skateboarders. Placement of planters, non-moveable seating and handrails should further encourage easy wheelchair and pedestrian access, and seek to discourage the use of skateboards.

### **3.3 Defensible Space**

A plaza should afford good visual surveillance opportunities both from within the space and along the edges. People need to feel secure and will usually avoid dark hidden corners and vacant places.

A plaza should be designed to maximize opportunities for casual monitoring from its perimeter and abutting developments. Surveillance and overview from adjacent sidewalks, windows and decks are necessary components that contribute to the safety of a plaza.

### **3.4 Lighting and Public Features**

Good night time generalized lighting is important to enhance safety of a plaza, particularly if it functions as a short cut or as a through route for pedestrians. Appropriately located and designed lighting may also discourage loitering.

**Figure 5. A Plaza Should Provide Lighting Along Major Night Time Routes**



In autumn and winter, darkness occurs in late afternoon, coinciding with rush hours. This is generally a time of maximum plaza pedestrian flow, generated from office and retail buildings so lighting should be on timers to account for seasonal changes.

A plaza should also provide easy and direct access to public telephones and information signs.

**Figure 6. A Woman and Child Enjoy a Safe, Relaxing Plaza Environment**



## **4 Environment**

### **4.1 Sunlight**

In Vancouver, exposure to direct sunlight is very important for many people. Warmth and sunshine are major user attractions.

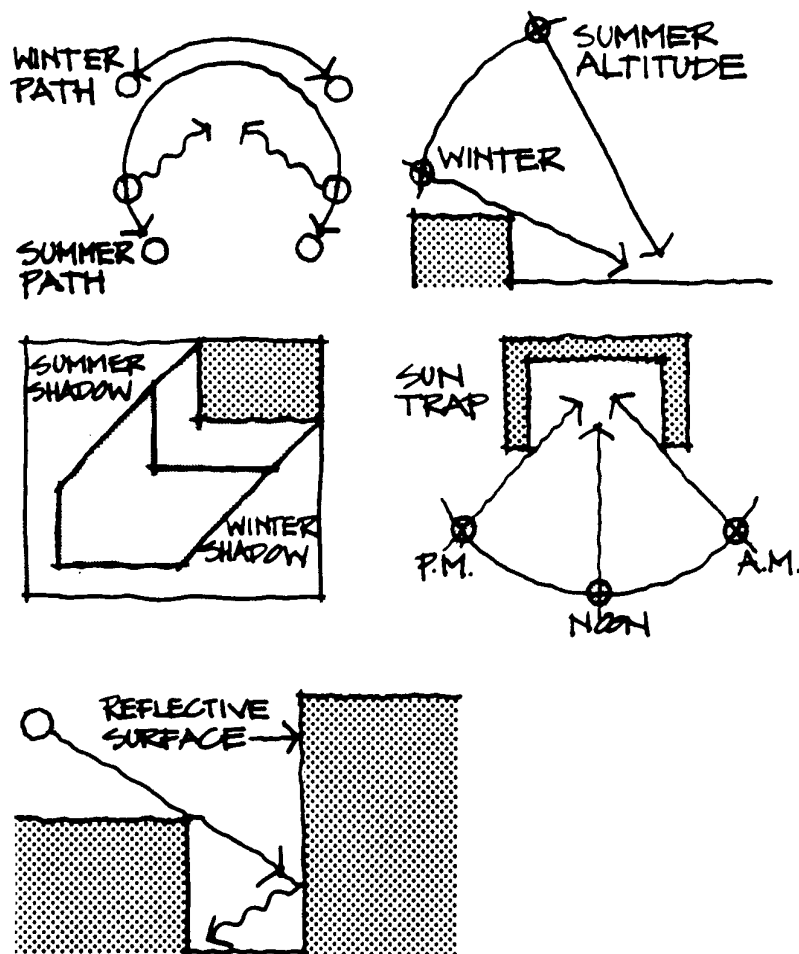
Sun paths, sun altitudes and shadow patterns in the plaza should be examined for all seasons, particularly the spring and autumn. Sunlight is particularly valued at lunch time in commercial business areas.

Sunlight can be maximized by:

- locating seating in areas of maximum sunlight;
- creating sun traps - areas surrounded by walls with an orientation toward the south (walls should not block plaza/street visibility);
- utilizing reflective light surfaces (if no direct sunlight is available).



Figure 7. Plazas Should Consider Sunlight Factors



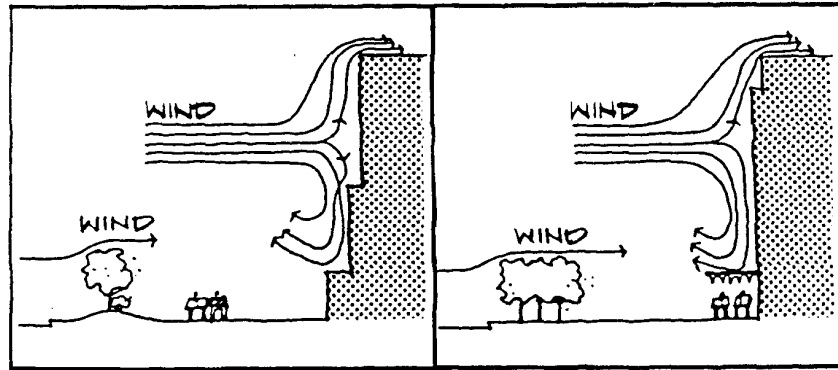
#### 4.2 Wind

Downdrafts from surrounding high-rise buildings can cause user discomfort and should be prevented or reduced through specific design measures. Wherever possible, protection should be offered from strong northwest winds and from harsh easterly winds which can accompany fall and winter rainstorms.

Wind reduction can be achieved by the following measures:

- avoid large, open, unprotected areas;
- avoid wind funnels: narrow openings between buildings with easterly or northwest alignment;
- utilize planting, low walls and canopies for wind deflection.

**Figure 8. Plaza Users Should Be Protected From Harsh Winds With Planting and Canopies**



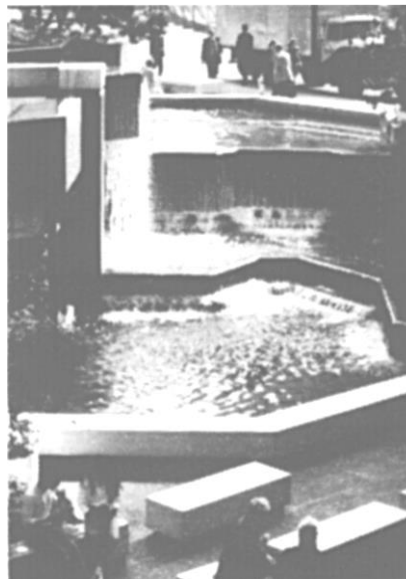
#### **4.3**

##### **Noise**

High levels of traffic, industrial and other ambient noises detract from the enjoyment of a plaza.

Noise can be partially mitigated by detracting attention from the noise source through the introduction of such elements as fountains or waterfalls.

**Figure 9. A Plaza Should Strive To Partially Reduce Street Noise With Water Features**



#### **4.4 Weather Protection**

In Vancouver's rainy climate, plazas should be designed with some overhead weather protection. Such protection should be provided at waiting points and along major pedestrian routes.

Protection can be achieved with the following devices:

- canopies;
- awnings;
- shelters;
- glazed trellises.

**Figure 10. Weather Protection Should Be Provided Along Major Routes**



#### **4.5 Environmentally Sensitive Design**

Landscape design today must recognize a new reality in environmental awareness. For example, wherever possible, permeable surfaces should be considered. Use of drought resistant plants may lessen dependency on automatic irrigation. Selection of plant materials should be done with a mind to reduce use of chemical laden maintenance. Perhaps plantings can be more productive by providing a habitat for birds. A revised aesthetic may be in order: seasonal change can be achieved by selecting a variety of flowering or colourful shrubs and perennials instead of largely relying on annuals which are put to waste several times during the year.

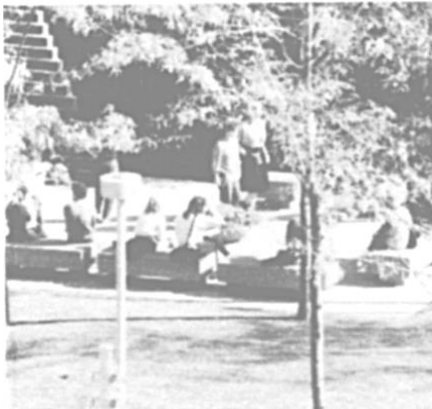
### **5 User Attractions**

#### **5.1 Seating**

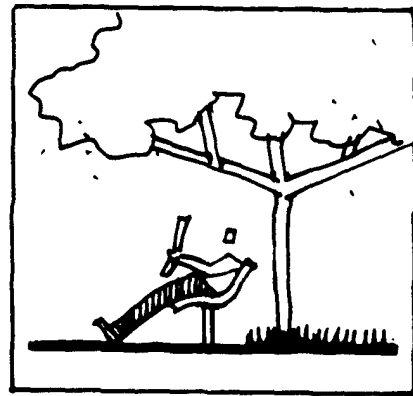
Good seating is important to plaza users. Without it, fewer people will stop to use a space. There are four major points to remember when planning seating:

- a) Plentiful Seating
  - maximize opportunities for sitting: walls, steps, planters, pool edges, lawns.
- b) Choice of Sitting Location
  - locate seating toward street, oriented to a view, near building entrances, next to attractions/amenities, in shade, in sun.
- c) Variety of Seating Types
  - in groups/couples/alone;
  - fixed and moveable;
  - disabled accessible.
- d) Comfortable Seating
  - provide warmth: generally wood is preferable to stone, concrete or metal;
  - provide contoured seating, preferably with a back and armrest.

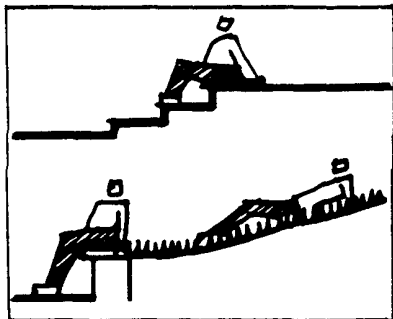
**Figure 11. Group Seating**



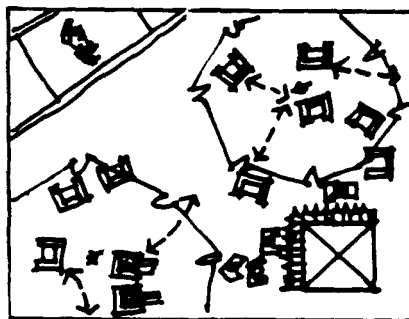
**Figure 12. Seats With Backs**



**Figure 13. Seating on Inherent**



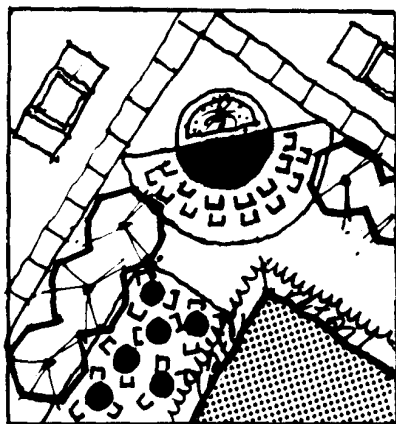
**Figure 14. Moveable Seating Features**



## **5.2 Activity Generators**

Successful plazas are generally characterized by several activity generators. Examples of such activity generators include food and retail outlets, as well as entertainment, which attract users and encourage socializing, relaxation and festivities. Good plaza management can include soliciting groups to activate the space, such as folk dancers, street theatre musicians and exhibitors (see Section 5.7, Good Management). Providing the infrastructure for events (e.g. electrical outlets, water supply and lighting) will facilitate such activity.

**Figure 15. Food and Retail Outlets and Entertainment Create a Social Atmosphere**



**Figure 16. Open Air Café**



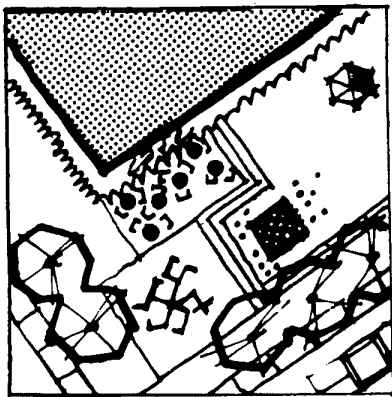
### 5.3 Amenities

A plaza which is furnished with a variety of amenity features encourages general public usage and creates a sense of liveliness and excitement. Art work should provide a focal point for the plaza or become an integral component of the overall design of the plaza. Bike racks, drinking fountains and waste receptacles are practical, essential amenities.

Some others are:

- game tables;
- kiosks for information and posters;
- open air cafes;
- children's play equipment (where appropriate).

**Figure 17. Plazas Should Be Furnished With Open Air Cafes, Sculptures, Game Tables and Kiosks**



**Figure 18. Sculpture Often Provides a Focal Point in the Plaza**



### 5.4 Natural Elements

Natural elements which reflect seasonal change should be provided, such as water and trees, shrubs, ground covers, vines and flowers in a variety of colours and textures. Whenever appropriate, lawn areas should be provided to visually "soften" the urban environment and as an effective dry weather seating area. Vegetation should never create substantial enclosures from the street.

**Figure 19. Natural Elements "Soften" a Plaza and Attract Users**

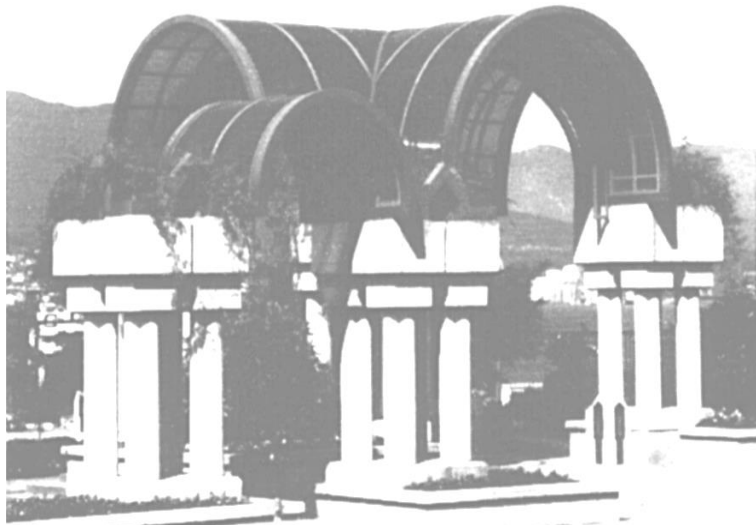


### **5.5 Detailing and Materials**

Plazas which are built of high quality durable materials, which reflect thoughtful detailing consistent or compatible with the development's architectural language, and which acknowledge the practical considerations of drainage, non-slip paving, disabled access and easy maintenance have a good chance of being successful. Quality detailing implies attention to jointing, building and street edges, and technically correct construction techniques.

Plants used should be of the highest quality and in sufficient quantity and of sufficient scale to make an impact. Plantings should be selected and located so that their functional and aesthetic qualities can be maximized. Incorporation of irrigation and adequate drainage will help to assure their survival and best possible appearance over time.

**Figure 20. Careful Detailing Should Include Consideration of Materials, Their Durability and Appearance**



## 5.6 Spatial Variety

Unless there is a specific symbolic or functional desire to accommodate large scale activities, large open spaces should be spatially defined into smaller, more easily identifiable and relatable areas. These smaller areas facilitate orientation and territory definition. People commonly gather at articulated edges in or around a plaza. A distinct sense of place can be achieved, in part, by defining edges and establishing a sense of enclosure through the use of canopies, trees, arcades and trellises which must be balanced with issues of visibility and defensibility.

**Figure 21. A Plaza Should Be Organized into Small Identifiable Spaces**



## 5.7 Good Management

Good plaza management should be provided, with emphasis on maintenance, operation and activity programming. This not only affects how a plaza looks but also how well it can attract users. By keeping the grounds clean, maintaining the lighting, seating and surface areas, providing seasonal planting and by operating a food service, the management will create a safe, lively and attractive space.

**Figure 21. A Clean, Well-Maintained Plaza Will Attract Users**

