

The plaza as a public good: civic spaces in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico¹

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Abstract: It has been long recognized by planners, architects and citizens that public spaces, squares and plazas (civic spaces) are important elements in the life of all communities. This can be especially true in urban settings that typically do not have the markets that characterize rural villages and where citizens meet for formal and informal exchanges. In this paper we will discuss civic spaces/plazas and the public good as well as the relationships with quality of life (QOL) and planning. We will report on an empirical study of four selected plazas that we have conducted in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, over the past three years. Specifically we will provide a classification of the four plazas in terms of criteria relating to 'place making' as elaborated by Whyte (1980) and discussed on the Project for Public Spaces web site. In addition we will provide comments on the planning implications of the classification and the prospects for improving the quality of the spaces to enhance QOL for residents of Puerto Vallarta region (approximately 350,000) and for the many visitors (2.5 million) who visit PV every year.

Introduction

It has been long recognized that public spaces, squares and plazas (i.e. civic spaces) are important elements in the life of all communities. Banerjee (2001) asserts that public space is shrinking, and the future of such spaces that are necessary for civility to flourish must confront three major trends of privatization, globalization and the communications revolution. In this paper we will discuss civic spaces and the public good in reference to quality of life and planning, in Puerto Vallarta.

Although the need for civic spaces is perhaps widely recognised, their use has been the subject of some discussion. Rochon (2003) offers a critical appraisal of the architectural planning of selected places that could

potentially contribute to increased social interactions. The articles clearly demonstrate that without careful planning some public spaces fail as places where people congregate and feel a sense of belonging. It follows that planners have a responsibility to promote public spaces. Ideally civic spaces are places for citizens to meet and interact. Further, such spaces can add to the quality of life (QOL) of people if they are planned carefully and function effectively.¹ The organization Project for Public Spaces (PPS) offers a detailed web site (<www.pps.org>) with information on the attributes of successful public spaces, the reasons why some spaces fail or succeed, and examples of such places from around the world.

According to Zucker (1966, 2), “[t]he square represents a psychological parking place within the civic landscape ...the square dictates the flux of life not only within its own confines but also through the adjacent streets for which it forms a quasi estuary...” Zucker’s (1966, 1) book provides a classic overview of squares in the life of a city and town, and he reminds us that: “The unique relationship between the open area of a square, the surrounding buildings, and the sky above creates a genuine emotional experience comparable to the impact of any other work of art ...this central formative element [the square] ...makes the community a community and not merely an aggregation of individuals.”

Squares Over Time and Space

Planned squares appeared in ancient Greece from the 5th century BC. The diffusion among civilizations over space and time of the idea of incorporating civic spaces into a city plan is elaborated in Zucker (1966), and other writers such as Cleary (1999) have focused either on specific squares (*Places Royales* in France) in particular countries and cities, or on the merits of open spaces on the quality of life of citizens.

Clearly squares are critical elements in the life of a town or city and with careful planning they can enhance the status of a place as well as provide a necessary condition to ensure civic pride. For these reasons we argue that a city such as Puerto Vallarta, that seeks to attract tourists as well as integrate local citizens in everyday commercial and social/recreational life along with the growing number of visitors, should pay close attention to the planning of its plazas and civic spaces as they are valuable assets to be preserved and protected.

Within the context of Latin America, Middleton (2003) discusses the impact of informal traders in historic city centres and the effects on international tourism in such centres. His fieldwork was conducted in Quito,

Ecuador. He argues that old city centres can be seen as sites of confrontation, namely contested spaces, however with careful planning and citizen participation they can develop as attractive sites that accommodate traders, the local public and tourists. Low (1999) has examined the role of the plaza in Costa Rica using over 25 years of fieldwork that began initially in 1972, and was followed by detailed work on plazas in San Jose from 1985. She reminds us that plazas may be designed to offer citizens views of military parades – remnants of Hausmann’s designs for Paris - or such plazas may offer views of important buildings or, more humbly but no less significantly, they can provide spaces for informal discussions among individuals and for group activities. The plaza has indeed been the site of political manifestation as was evidenced in Tiananman Square in Beijing in 1989 - reputedly the largest square in the world - and the daily demonstration in the Plaza de Mayo of Buenos Aires, Argentina by mothers protesting the disappearance of their children.

Mexican villages, towns, and cities also have a traditional (Spanish-origin) structure that includes a plaza or plazas as organizing principles (Arreola and Curtis 1993). The main plaza was the principal public space and was commonly surrounded by institutions such as the church and government offices. It was often a hub of commercial activity, as well as for social and recreational activities. What Arreola and Curtis term “proper Spanish colonial towns” also had smaller secondary plazas that had different functions and were related to different patterns of urban activities (1993, 45). To a greater or lesser extent these spaces and places have maintained themselves as the urban forms, have grown and developed and “modernised”, and taken on different functions such as modern-day industry and commerce, and recreation and tourism.

In this paper we will report on an empirical study that we conducted of four selected plazas in Puerto Vallarta (PV) from 2001 to 2003. Specifically we will provide a classification of the four plazas in terms of criteria relating to ‘place making’ as elaborated by Whyte (1980) and discussed on the PPS web site. We will also provide comments with reference to the planning implications of the classification and the prospects for improving the quality of the spaces to enhance QOL for the approximately 350,000 residents of PV region, and for the several million visitors who visit PV every year.

We assert in this paper that a civic space, such as a plaza or square, is a public good and as such deserves to be supported by public investments. The civic spaces of a town or city complement other efforts by the state to enhance identity and the quality of life of citizens, and the civic spaces in Puerto Vallarta continue to play a vital role in this regard. The planners of civic spaces are faced by conflicting priorities and goals, and we will

identify some of the major ones and we encourage public debate on the search for the appropriate roles for civic spaces in a place such as Puerto Vallarta.

The Public Good and Quality of Life

The study of the public good is a worthy topic of inquiry for planners and of considerable significance in the formation and evaluation of public policies that focus on the roles for public places and space in the promotion of QOL. The plaza has *inter alia* the potential to contribute to community spirit and identity. The planner must be aware of matters of access and community when evaluating the effectiveness of a plaza. Of course given the vast numbers of tourists who visit places such as PV every year, the plazas play a major role in their satisfaction with the place too. A term similar to the public good is the common good, and Black's Law Dictionary (1979, 1104) defined this as "...a generic term to describe the betterment of the general public." We interpret this to suggest processes that yield positive outcomes on QOL to citizens and visitors to PV.

As Habermas (1987, 319) maintained, the network of public spheres should "make it possible for a ... private person to participate in the reproduction of culture, and for a public of citizens of the state to participate in the social integration mediated by public opinion." Public culture is therefore associated with the notions of civil society and the welfare economics concepts of 'public goods', and a cultural *planning* approach would seek to apply resource, facility and land-use allocation and distribution-including what cultural geographer Crang (1998, 164) identified as "ideas of space to which everyone has access in which people can meet as formal equals harking back to the Roman market-place" (quoted in Evans 2001, 39).

Thus we argue that the public good is in large measure related to the perceived quality of life of individuals, and hence the collectivity, and it owes much to the availability and the effective, equitable utilization of the facilities that cater to the myriad needs of citizens as we progress through life from birth to death. The civic space can contribute positively in this regard if it is indeed a space where all are welcome and all feel safe and secure.

The commodification of the public good yields attitudes and practises of the market place including ownership and property rights, price and cost, competition and consumption patterns. Citizens and locals alike in PV need to do more than consume in private places such as shops, they

need public spaces as sites of interaction and for free pleasure. The famous Malecón in PV is the classic example of a public space. In fact it is a pathway where all can promenade freely, back and forth. This walking space is a connecting link among the main public spaces in PV as shown on Figure 1.

Let us now turn to the civic state and begin with the proposition that such a state is a necessary condition to promote the civic space as a public good. Spinner (1994, 170) elaborates on this: “[t]he state is about space and memories; through these commonalities, liberal citizens often develop overlapping memories. The civic state ... is eclectic, pragmatic, fair, just and reasonable; it stresses identity and recognition while working for egalitarian, democratic institutional arrangements for individuals, voluntary groupings and state agencies to cater to all the needs of all citizens...” The civic state is a work in progress that seeks to promote and protect the public good. But what is this good? Certainly it refers to the betterment of the whole and QOL as mentioned earlier, but not all citizens in a state share the same definition of either the ways to achieve it or the desired end results.

If public and private initiatives and energy can be marshalled to provide and enhance all those elements of culture, including public spaces, as well as health, education and general welfare, that stimulate and promote civic virtues and identity then a civic state and *civitas* may emerge, and the public good as QOL is surely enhanced. A strong case can be made for the promotion of the civic state to enhance QOL and the public good, and the future of civic spaces.

Four Civic Spaces in PV

When the Spanish first reached the area now called Puerto Vallarta there was an Indian settlement (Fregoso 1986). The exact date of foundation of the contemporary Spanish settlement is unclear. There is some evidence of a village near today's old town in the late 1700s, and certainly there was some development during the 1800s related to local trading (and smuggling), mining, fishing, whaling, and long distance exchange. In 1851 the settlement of Las Peñas (“The Boulders”) was founded at the mouth of the Cuale River - perhaps where the old village had also been. In 1880 the population was about 1,500, in 1885 a port was inaugurated, and official status as a *commisariat* was acquired in 1886. In 1918 the town was elevated to municipality status and the name was changed to Puerto Vallarta in honour of an ex-governor of the state of Jalisco. In 1968 Vallarta became a city, but growth has been (until recently) quite slow. From 12,500 in

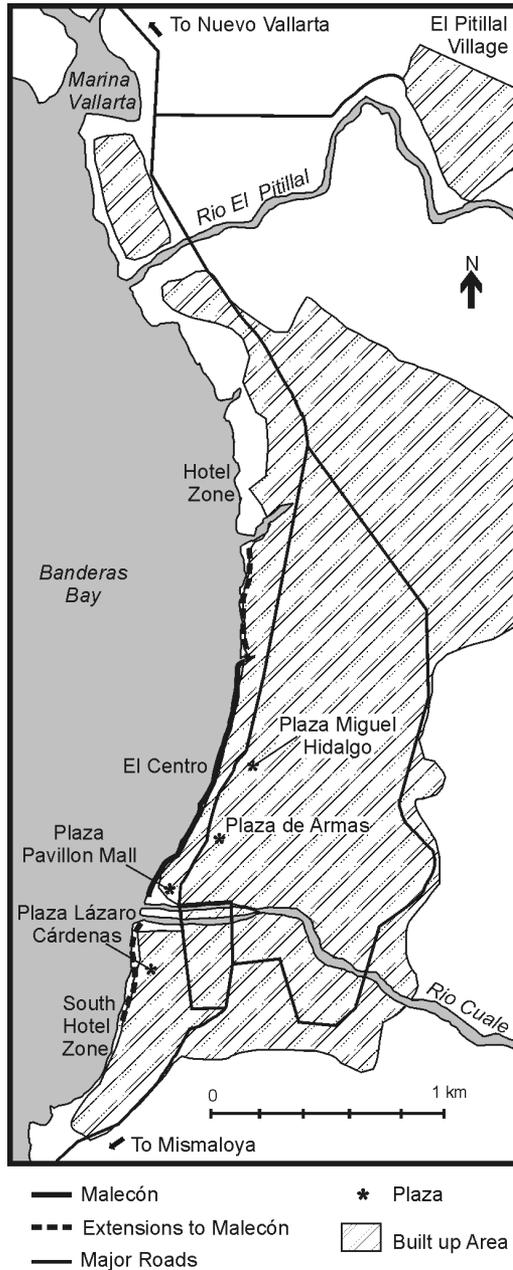


Figure 1: The Puerto Vallarta region.

1964, by 1970 the population of the settlement had risen to only 24,115. However, by the mid 1990s the population of Puerto Vallarta had grown to 162,000 and that of the Jalisco coast, which can be viewed as “greater Vallarta” now has an estimated population of over 350,000 (Jiménez Martínez 1998; <<http://www.pvconnect.com/map.html>>).

The relatively slow and recent growth has meant that the retention of “character” has been part of the charm of the settlement, and this includes the plazas and their associated land uses. One result is that the core of the city still retains many older buildings, of traditional architectural style, and Puerto Vallarta is considered by many to be the “most Mexican” of all the beach destinations in Mexico.

The greater Puerto Vallarta region can be seen as a series of zones (Figure 1). Traditionally two have been recognised within the older areas of the city, although nowadays some others can be identified within the larger urbanised region to the north and south (Everitt et al. 2001). First there is the “southern hotel zone”, which lies south of the Cuale River. Second there is the “central town” (*el centro*), which lies north of the Cuale River and these constitute our study area. Arreola and Curtis (1993, 49) suggest that a number of traditional functions have persisted in many Mexican cities despite significant cultural landscape change. One of these five is the plaza.² Four important plazas can be identified within the study area. One is clearly the most important, with the other three being secondary and subordinate to it as public spaces and places, but just as obviously all four contain many elements of a common model (Figure 2). That is to say the plazas have many universal elements, while not conforming to any standardised plan.

The most important square (what Arreola and Curtis (1993, 133) term the *plaza mayor*) is located in the heart of the old city (*el centro*). Arreola and Curtis argue that “[p]erhaps nowhere in the public areas of the border cities is the impress of tradition more evident than in the plazas of *el centro*, especially the *plaza mayor*” (1993, 133). It is our contention that this case can also be made for Puerto Vallarta, even though this is a more recent urban construction, and has been consequently affected by somewhat different processes. Officially termed the Plaza de Armas³, the *plaza mayor* is one of the most conspicuous features of the urban cultural landscape of Puerto Vallarta. It is uncertain when this place was first created, but it appears to date to at least the early twentieth century. It probably predates this time as a civic space, but had in the past a different cultural content and thus functioned as a place somewhat differently (De Oca de Contreras 2002). For much of the history of Vallarta this plaza was also the centre of the elite residential area of the central city, and it is possible that social status was based upon residential distance from this plaza, as was true

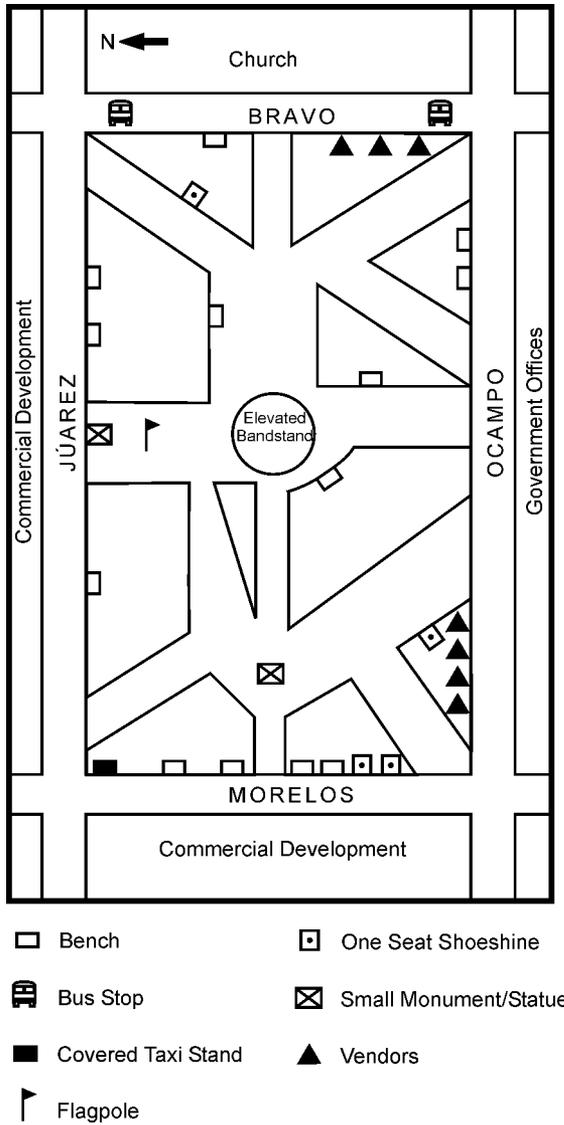


Figure 2: Generic plan of a Mexican plaza.

elsewhere in Mexico (Arreola and Curtis 1993, 45). Certainly many of the early fine homes can still be detected in this area, although they often now function as restaurants, cyber cafés or art galleries.

Like most Mexican plazas, and like its Vallartan companions, this plaza is rectangular and encompasses a city block (about 2000 square metres). Although the square today contains a considerable amount of open space around its central bandstand (*kiosco*), in the past it did contain a larger extent of formal gardens, separated by criss-cross pathways, similar to those still found in two of the other squares (De Oca de Contreras 2002). Its landscape has no doubt been cleared and paved in the recent past in order to provide a greater amount of space for the various functions it services, but it still contains many typical plaza-features. The Plaza de Armas has a number of contemporary functions, including cultural ceremonial, official ceremonial, touristic (including sales of lower-order goods and services), recreational (sitting, standing, talking), as a site for political demonstrations, and as the symbolic centre of the city – it is arguably the “uncontested central nexus of public life” (Arreola and Curtis 1993, 133). It is flanked on the northern side by the *Palacio Municipal* or City Hall (built on this site in 1981, replacing stores and houses), and on the eastern side by stores (but these lie just in front of a major church (“The Lady of Guadalupe”) – the tower of which is one of the landscape symbols of PV. To the west is the Malecón, the historic seafront walkway that connects the Old Town together, and to the south are more commercial establishments, including banks and shops, and the consulates of both Canada and the USA.

The second plaza lies at the northern end of the old city, near the Hotel Rosita, built in 1948 as the city’s first true hotel (Everitt et al. 2001). It is known as Miguel Hidalgo Plaza and was inaugurated in 1954. It thus serves as a marker for the city’s growth to the north. Like the *plaza major*, this square has many of the classic elements of a Mexican plaza (Arreola and Curtis 1993, 133). It is, however, an irregular quadrilateral and not a perfect square as two non-integrated grid patterns of the older city meet at this point. It is about 5400 square metres in area, reflecting the larger blocks in this part of the city. It is a conspicuous landscape feature and is a tree-shaded urban oasis of “managed nature”. It contains many cast-iron benches, as well as plaques and other commemorative features common to the Mexican plaza (Arreola and Curtis 1993, 138). Characteristically this plaza gives the impression of both spaciousness and containment (Arreola and Curtis 1993, 136). It serves a number of functions, but although similar to those in the *plaza major*, there are also significant differences. One side of the plaza (the south) serves as a bus station (another typical plaza function), and another side (the west) is a permanent daytime

market for locals as well as selling lower-order tourist goods. To the east (where the old city cemetery was located in the 1950s) is another large church (La Iglesia de la Virgen del Refugio), as well as some more government offices. To the west is a Baptist church that is a more recent addition to the area. Although this plaza serves many tourists who are walking from the central city to the hotel zone to the north, it is also a very local-neighbourhood space. It is much more so than the Plaza de Armas, which also attracts many Vallartans, but from all over the urban area. Hidalgo Plaza is also successful as a place, but for somewhat different reasons than the *plaza mayor*.

The third plaza is a core landscape feature for the southern hotel zone popularly known as the “*zona romantica*”. This region of the city was relatively isolated from the old town until 1959 when the first concrete bridge was built over the Cuale River (De Oca de Contreras 2002, 253). Officially our study place is called Lázaro Cárdenas Plaza, named after a hero of the Mexican civil war of the early twentieth century. It is a rectangle rather than a perfect square, about 3300 square metres in area, as it extends farther east-west than north-south, reflecting its proximity to the shoreline. It has a bandstand, criss-cross pathways, and is home to many cast-iron benches, as well as plaques and other commemorative features. It also has a bus station on one (eastern) side, as well as a school to the south, commercial developments to the north, and tourist oriented beach commercial and hotel developments to the (extended) west of the plaza. Compared to the other plazas it is underused, perhaps because there is little local population as the area has become more tourist-oriented, but at the same time has little to appeal to most tourists.

The fourth plaza, the Plaza Pavillon Mall, is located close to the city centre, just to the north of the Cuale River mouth. But is isolated from general view by buildings, lower order services (a line of vendors’ kiosks), and a major roadway. It is also a considerable distance away from significant areas of local housing, is essentially unserved by public transportation, and has no church or public buildings close to it. It is thus in some ways the antithesis of a typical Mexican plaza. Strictly speaking a rectangular symmetrical plaza, it gives the impression of being less formal in shape as it is flanked on two sides by the ocean and the river, and on a third by a curving roadway. It is about 5000 square metres in area, and has considerable growth potential. On the ocean side it is paralleled by an unfinished extension of the Malecón that runs south of the Cuale River to join to the beach areas of the *zona romantica*. It is at present an under-utilised and unsuccessful plaza, despite containing a number of cast iron benches and children’s play equipment, but is one that does appear to have considerable potential for future use by both locals and tourists.

Because it currently has few of the characteristics of a successful public space identified by the PPS it is arguably of the **most** interest for this paper as it offers the greatest possibility for change and successful development as public space in the future.

What Makes a Successful Place?

Our discussion here is greatly influenced by: “The Project for Public Spaces” (PPS). An important follow-up of this work was published by the PPS in 2000 and is called “How to turn a Place Around.” This research was concerned with places that ‘worked’ and those that ‘didn’t work’. Initially it was concerned with playgrounds (in New York City) but later was extended to a variety of kinds of public places - and particularly plazas/squares. It was concerned with the critical roles that public places play in our communities, in terms of giving identity to cities, benefiting cities economically and environmentally, and of providing settings for cultural activities. The PPS project personnel have been very successful in characterizing the key qualities of a successful place, which they summarise as being “accessible”; having “activities” for people; being “comfortable” and with a good image; and being a “sociable” place where people meet and take other people. This process led them to enunciating a series of ten benefits of creating good public spaces” (see PPS 2000; Whyte 1980 and also <www.pps.org>):

- Support local economies
- Attract business investments
- Attract tourism
- Provide cultural opportunities
- Encourage volunteerism
- Reduce crime
- Improve pedestrian safety
- Increase use of public transport
- Improve public health
- Improve the environment

In addition, the PPS has identified a set of eleven principles for creating great public spaces:

- The community is the expert.
- Create a place, not a design (i.e. a place, not just a space).

- You can't do it alone. Look for partners.
- Officials say, "It can't be done". But it can.
- You can see a lot just by observing.
- Develop a vision.
- Form supports function: what do the users want?
- "Triangulate": locate elements of place so that they will be used.
- Start with the petunias: small, short-term actions can make a difference.
- Money is not the issue: sometimes too much money is a problem.
- You are never finished. A true place needs ongoing management

Although the PPS research was fascinating and promising, it seemed to us that this work could (and should) be taken out of the Anglo American context and tested elsewhere, in order to see if it has a wider validity. Our prior experience in Jalisco indicated that this could be a very suitable laboratory for testing some of these benefits and implementing some of the principles, as public space in this part of Mexico (both small town and larger urban) is still very much characterised by a variety of uses, by pedestrians, and thus fits many of the criteria that concerned the PPS. As noted above Puerto Vallarta has a number of public places (and in particular, plazas) that are based upon what might be termed a 'Mexican model', and so PV became an obvious study area within a larger cultural region. Thus our evaluation of the PPS research led us to an analysis of the plazas in Puerto Vallarta and to a classification of these civic spaces based upon an extension of the PPS principles. Our classification is summarised in Table 1. In this table we present the results of an evaluation of the four major plazas that we analysed. We used local informants as well as the PPS research to pick the best criteria for evaluation, and were thus able to include both more general PPS concepts as well as more particular (PV) criteria. We then spent time in each place, at different times of day and on different days, and 'scored' each criterion for each place on a five-point scale.

Civic Spaces, Social Responsibility and Planning

Our results demonstrate that two of the plazas are relatively problem free and consequently are very successful in drawing people; one is slightly less so; and one has a long way to go as it currently keeps most people out,

and thus does not work as a place. Interestingly, however, even the Plaza de Armas has deficiencies when scrutinised through our demanding lens. In fact, although it is the *plaza major*, it ‘scores’ little better than the Hidalgo Plaza, because its very success in some categories has meant that it is penalised in others, and its central location almost inevitably leads to new challenges. A summary of the scores for each plaza is given in Table 1. The total score for each plaza assumes that each factor is equally important.

If we look at our variables in turn, there are four major problem areas for this first plaza. First, there is limited vendor use (variable #6) within the plaza. However, it should be noted that there is extensive vendor use just a short distance away, across the (major traffic) street (Morelos) on the Malecón. In addition on special occasions vendors do occupy the plaza to a much greater degree. This deficiency has been recognised by the city, which is looking for some way of reducing traffic on Morelos and/or improving the connection between the plaza and the Malecón, which would probably increase vendor use. Second, the plaza is harshly defined by the surrounding buildings (#8). It is hemmed-in on three sides (with Morelos on the fourth). It seems unlikely that much can be done here, although if traffic patterns were to be changed this would probably affect this ‘score’, by opening the square to the west side. Similarly, by definition, a change in the traffic patterns would raise the score on #13. Lastly, washrooms (#17) are available in City Hall and in other buildings around the square, and along the Malecón. Once again traffic changes would improve this score. In some ways it is less ‘green’ than other parks, but this reflects its higher level of use. Sometimes success is failure. In terms of the PPS “four key qualities”, this plaza has an accessible situation, but there are problems with site access. People are commonly engaged in activities in the square, but there is room for improvement. The space is quite comfortable, and has a positive image. Finally, it is a very sociable space – especially when organised (official and unofficial) activities take place.

Hidalgo Plaza lacks a bandstand (#7), but within its context this does not seem to be that serious a deficiency, as it is well served by seats and landscaping. Its name (#10) is known by the locals, but it does not have high name recognition with tourists.⁴ It is again difficult to reach from some directions because of heavy traffic (#13), but as with the *plaza major*, a change in this variable might be difficult, expensive, and contentious. The plaza is also accessible, but not as central as the Plaza de Armas. People engage in a variety of activities in the plaza, and the space is comfortable and has a good image – but more so for locals than tourists. It is a sociable space, but more so with respect to its borders than in its centre.

Table 1: A classification of civic spaces in Puerto Vallarta.

Criterion	A	B	C	D
Places (see legend below)	(Armas)	(Hidalgo)	(Cárdenas)	(Pavillon)
1 seats/benches/low walls for sitting	5	5	5	1
2 well situated vis-à-vis the town centre/Malecón	5	4	4	2
3 close to public buildings-church/ city hall/ library/ social services centre/schools	5	5	2	1
4 landscaped/gardens/plants/trees	4	5	5	1
5 eating places very close or <u>in</u> plaza	4	5	5	1
6 vendors use plaza	3	4	5	3
7 band stand	5	1	5	1
8 harsh walls/buildings define edge of plaza	3	4	5	2
9 locals and tourists use the plaza	5	4	3	2
10 plaza is named and name is readily recognized	5	3	3	1
11 women alone use plaza	5	5	3	1
12 families use plaza	5	5	3	2
13 easy access to the plaza no busy streets to cross	2	2	3	4
14 neat/tidy/well-kept	4	4	4	1
15 shops nearby	5	5	5	2
16 shade and sufficient trees	4	5	5	3
17 washroom availability	2	4	1	4
Total Score (out of 85)	71	70	66	32

Legend

A - Iglesia de la Virgen de Guadalupe: Plaza de Armas

B - Iglesia de la Virgen del Refugio: Plaza Miguel Hidalgo

C - Plaza Lázaro Cárdenas

D - Plaza Pavillon Mall

Data for classification: a five point semantic scale - *excellent* (5); *good* (4); *satisfactory* (3); *poor* (2); *very poor* (1)

Cárdenas Plaza suffers from its remoteness (#3) from the core functions of the city, and it is hard to see a simple remedy for this challenge. Its lower score also reflects, more importantly, its relative isolation from local populations, but in some ways its resultant tranquility can be seen as part of its charm. Washrooms are available in restaurants in the vicinity. The challenge for this plaza could be seen as somehow increasing its use for both locals and tourists, but its proximity to some of the best beaches in the region might make this challenge insurmountable. Thus perhaps this 'deficiency' could better be sold as an advantage, and the serenity of the plaza could become its successful feature. Generally, this plaza is accessible to those in the *zona romantica*, but little known by others, and particularly tourists from the hotel zone and marina. Activities take place on the fringe of the plaza, but only in its centre on organised occasions. It is a comfortable space, but its image is more ill defined.

Plaza Pavillon Mall has a long way to go. It scores poorly on most criteria. In addition it has recently been damaged by major storms, and it is used as a temporary storage site for the resultant clean-up materials. But it would appear that it has always been more problematical as a public space, and that more energy needs to be concentrated in his area. Its advantages (close to the city centre, the presence of washrooms, and its proximity to the gradually extending Malecón) are considerable, but it is an area where community planning might be of paramount value, and where the PPS principles might be put to particularly good effect. There need to be more activities in this plaza that include a wider cross section of people. It needs to be made into a sociable space, and it needs to be made more comfortable. Its image is in need of a major overhaul. The good news is that if the PPS methodology is implemented, such a change is perfectly feasible.

In summary, the study plazas are all different, but at the same time have essential place similarities. The first three plazas must be judged as successful places, using both intuitive (qualitative) evaluations as well as quantitative scoring methods. This is not surprising for as Whyte indicates (1980, 17) "the best used plazas are sociable spaces" and these plazas are well used. At the same time the city and the citizens of Puerto Vallarta might decide to "improve" these plazas by, for instance, increasing their accessibility (although this has a cost); increasing the variety of activities that take place there (in order to draw a wider cross section of people (tourists and/or locals) to these places, more of the time; making them more sociable and more comfortable to more people, and thus changing their images. That is to say, these places do not need to be "turned around", but the principles elucidated by the PPS could be profitably applied to these places to make them even more successful. The fourth plaza, the

Plaza Pavillon Mall, needs to be the centrepiece of a community planning process based upon the PPS principles in order to determine where it fits in the general schema of public places in Puerto Vallarta, and how the goals for its development as a more successful place can best be achieved. It is our contention this would enable this plaza to be “turned around”, and a successful place be created that would enhance the social and economic viability of Puerto Vallarta, and improve the quality of life of both the city’s citizens, as well as the visitors to this key tourist destination.

Conclusion

Let us close by noting that in the ethos of western society, where individualism, materialism, and the emergence of a technocratic and sensate culture became established, dramatic changes are forcing human progress, the public good and quality of life to be defined by economic growth. Inevitably, this will occur at the cost of diminished environmental protection: *homo economicus* reigns. However, as Whyte (1980, 15) points out the creation of places that work for people also has economic advantages that result from the improvements in their QOL (see also PPS 2000, 14). Further, the rise in the importance of the state - with its vested interest in growth for strategic reasons - exacerbates the issue of reconciling economic growth and environmental protection to ensure sustainable communities. The question remains: precisely what is to be sustained or conserved, via what kind of stewardship? Is there such a person as *homo sustiens*? In the context of Puerto Vallarta this is further complicated as the ‘citizens’ can be seen to include both locals and tourists. Ultimately the focus of the civic space as a public good must be on the quality of life of citizens, taking into account existential aspects of being and having. The heightening of consciousness from the Hegelian perspective argues that this is the cause, not the effect, of the material world. The means of enhancing consciousness to empower citizens to define and implement alternate paradigms of progress beyond economic growth continues to challenge policy makers and ordinary folk, as well as academics and practitioners including planners who seek to define appropriate roles for civic spaces to play in contemporary urban life. Perhaps the use of the PPS principles as guidelines to make the public spaces of PV better could be a way of promoting such an empowerment.

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Endnotes

- ¹ An overview of QOL is provided by Massam (2002) under the title: Quality of Life: public planning and private living. For QOL in Puerto Vallarta see Massam and Everitt (2001) and Massam et al. (2003).
- ² The others are the "relative compactness of communities", the "core-versus-periphery tradition", the distinctive barrios, and the persistence of small neighbourhood stores and stands.
- ³ The name reflects the military parade ground origin of many of these plazas, and it is likely that the plaza major in PV fulfilled this function at times, as well.
- ⁴ Although a scientific survey was not conducted, we did question a number of tourists during our research and found few that knew the name of this plaza.