

Park Life – How do we use public spaces?

A selection of findings from *The Field Guide to Life in Urban Plazas* by SWA Group

Donut Effect

People tended to occupy the edges of a plaza before filling in the middle areas.



This was observed in a range of plazas, including plazas with seating and planting distributed fairly evenly throughout the space. Generally, the capacity of the spaces along the edge reached between 50-75% before people began migrating into the interior.

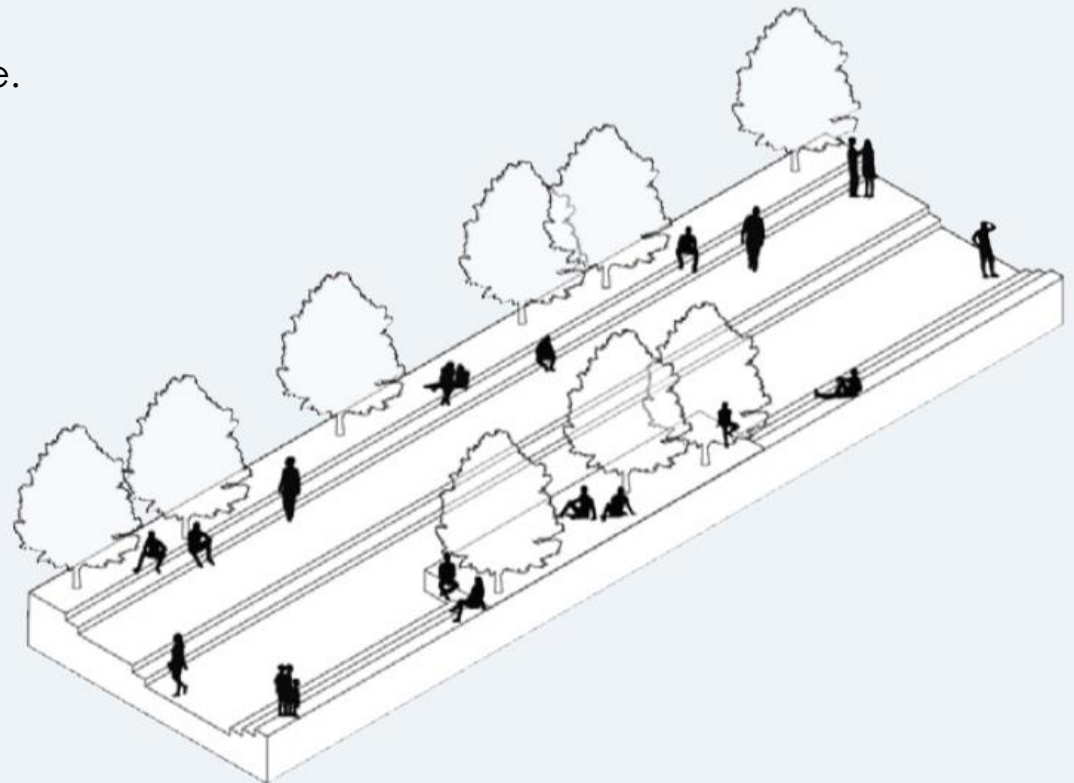
POTENTIAL DESIGN TACTICS

Design for the Edge

- Embrace the donut effect
- Provide places for people to rest
- Create congregation areas at edges

Activate the Void

- Enliven the central space
- Program a food vendor
- Make an interactive art piece



Roosting

Slightly perched and protected areas were popular.

Stationary people tended to go to elevated areas that overlooked the plaza space. The youngest gravitated towards higher perches (3'+), and the middle aged were drawn to slightly raised spaces (<3'). Protected perches with canopies and a sense of backing were most popular

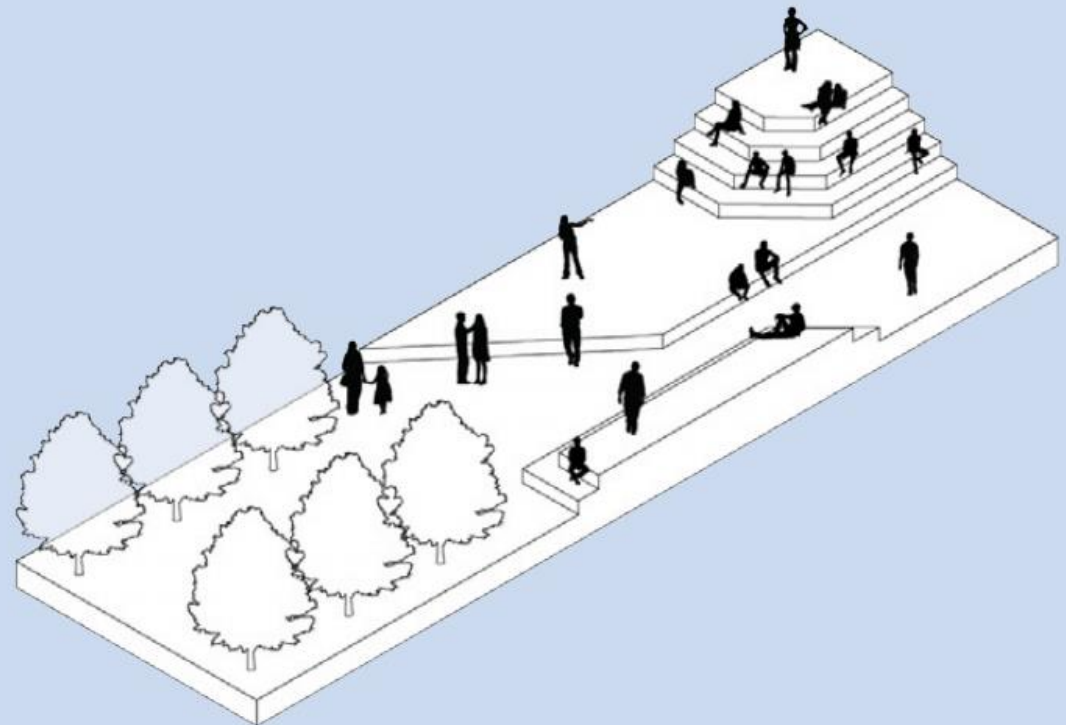
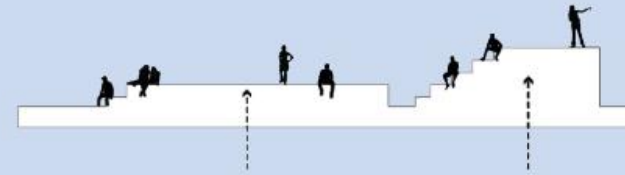
POTENTIAL DESIGN TACTICS

Build Terraces

- Develop a series of platforms
- Provide roosting opportunities
- Offer a range of heights

Provide Audience Seating

- Design elevated areas adjacent to flat areas
- Make areas for “roosters” to observe activity



Backmosphere

Spaces with a sense of backing, where there was less activity behind them, attracted people.

This phenomenon was observed in most of the plazas with people wanting protective seating. The backing took many forms— from higher plant material to walls, to construction fences and jersey barriers. People tended to occupy these sitting areas over more exposed sitting areas.

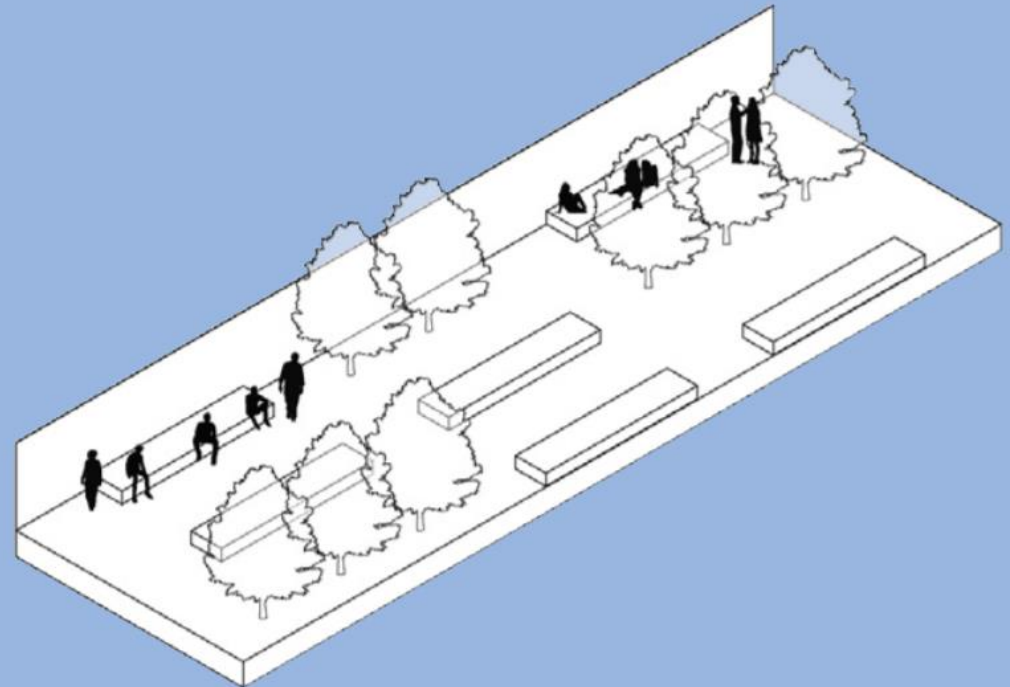
POTENTIAL DESIGN TACTICS

Design Backing

- Create physical barriers behind people

Reduce Back Activity

- Minimize high-traffic areas behind seating



Downstream Drift

Plazas with wide and open entrances at cross streets or transverse paths facilitated higher flows of people.

More people tended to pass into plazas from adjacent public spaces if the edge of the plaza was unobstructed by planting, furniture or walls. The wider the entrance, the greater the flow.



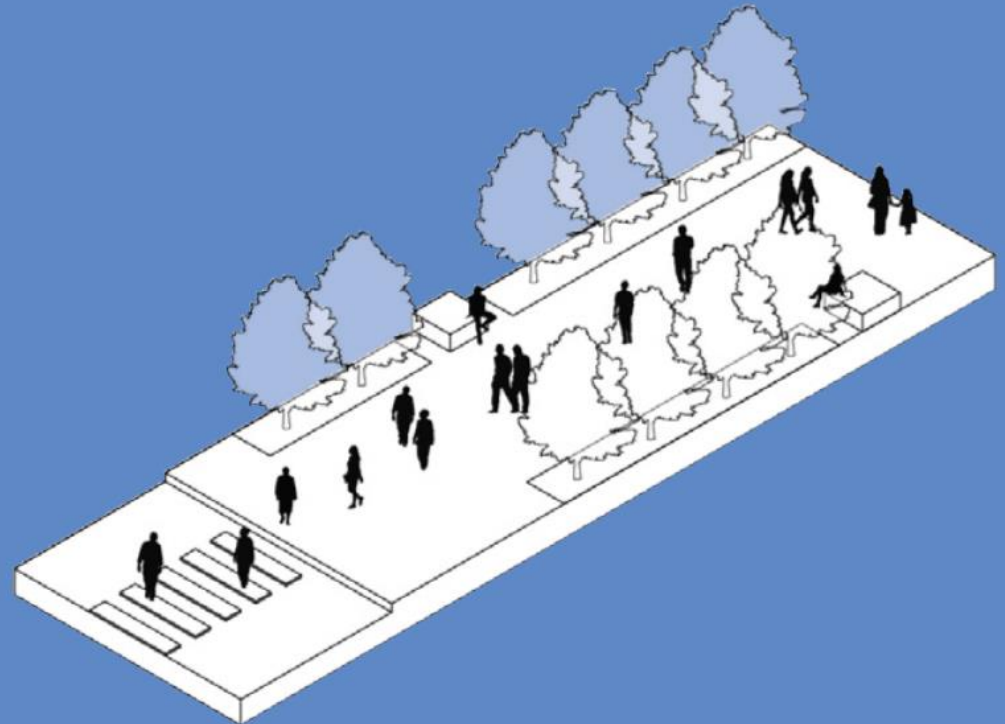
POTENTIAL DESIGN TACTICS

Create a Wide Mouth

- Make plazas inviting
- Design wide entrances
- Minimize pinch points

Maintain Views

- Ensure people can see into plaza
- Ensure people can see out of plaza



Stoopage

People used accessible elements at the edges of plazas to take short breaks.

This was observed in many plazas with high flows of pedestrian traffic. Those walking on the edge of plazas took short breaks and lingered if there were elements such as walls or planters to lean on or set their belongings upon. People often did this while waiting—for a bus, for the light to change, or to meet up with a friend/colleague.

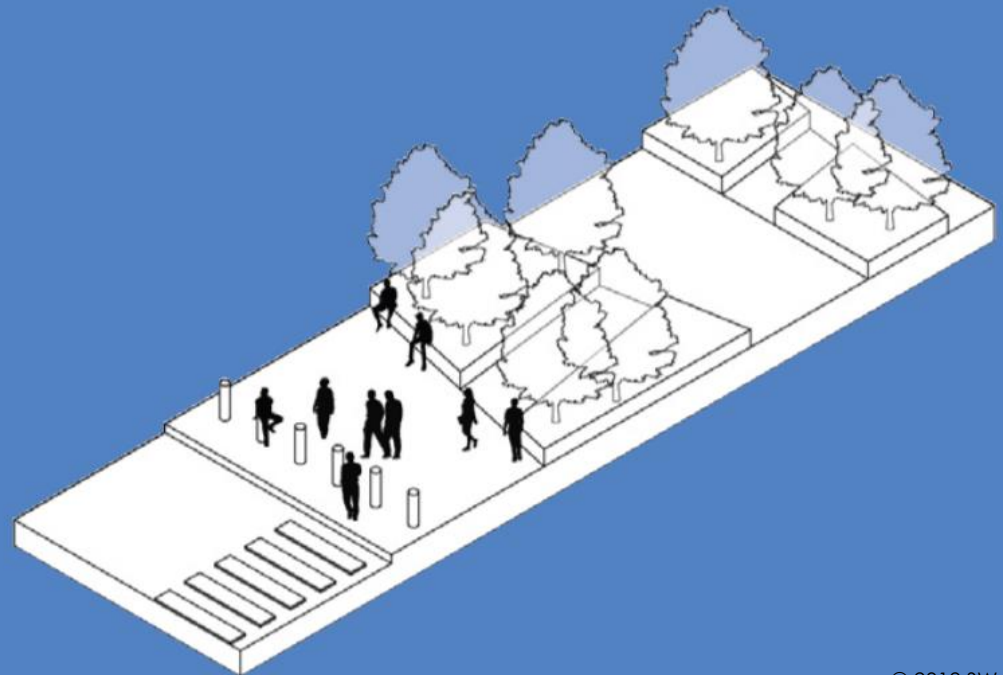
POTENTIAL DESIGN TACTICS

Activate Waiting Areas

- Identify edges where people gather and wait
- Design for comfortable waiting

Design for Short Breaks

- Incorporate taller walls or planters
- Ensure people can lean or rest



© 2019 SWA

Credits: The visuals throughout this resource are presented with the kind permission of SWA Group and are drawn from their full research report: *The Field Guide to Urban Plazas* authored by Emily Schlickman and Anya Domlesky. The graphics were designed by Paul Wehby. The report was edited by Julie Eakin and produced by SWA Group as part of their *Plaza Life Revisited* project. For the full report visit: www.swagroup.com

