



New Haven Green: Public Domain

The Green Square In America: How It Came To Be

by Peter Gisolfi, AIA, ASLA, LEED AP

Peter Gisolfi examines how the concept of the urban square in American cities was born out of old world influences.

The green square is an essential part of the urban environment in the United States. It is evident in diverse settings and in a variety of sizes. Examples exist in Santa Fe, New Orleans, Savannah, Boston, Philadelphia and New York City, to name just a few. Probably the most famous squares are derived from William Penn's 5-square plan for Philadelphia, and the multi-square plan for Savannah, laid out by James Oglethorpe.

Where did these urban squares come from? In Italy, rectangular squares based on ancient Roman precedents were introduced in the 15th and 16th centuries in Florence and Vigevano. At the beginning of the 17th century, these ideas traveled to Spain and France. Perhaps the most striking example of the green square is the Place de Vosges in Paris. This same idea, but interpreted less formally, became an essential feature in re-planning London after the Great Fire in 1666. Urban spaces in America are inspired most frequently by British precedents.

Italian lineage

The Roman Colonial town was based on a formulaic town plan that was used and reused throughout the empire. Most often constructed in a river valley, the plan was usually square, surrounded by walls, and defined by gridded streets. At the intersection of the center north-south street (the *cardo*) and the center east-west street (the *decumanus*) was the forum, the town square. It might be a market square, or it could also be a civic square surrounded by temples and public buildings.

Verona was a Roman Colonial town, built in 49 BC on flat land in the valley of the winding Adige River, in northern Italy. The central square (forum) was an elongated rectangle (in the north-south direction), paved in stone and surrounded originally by a 2-story colonnade, as was the custom. The shape of the forum survives in the Piazza Erbe, which is the market square to this day. The 3-acre piazza is now surrounded by irregularly-sized Medieval and Renaissance buildings.

Within the city of Verona are many ancient Roman ruins and artifacts, including the Arena di Verona, the best preserved arena from Roman times, which today serves as the summer home of La Scala Opera. The foundations of Roman towns survive throughout Europe and North Africa, and include such cities as Turin, Florence, Cordoba, Vienna and Paris. \

Renaissance Squares In Europe

The Italian Renaissance begins in literature in the 14th century, and in architecture in the 15th century. The buildings and urbanism of ancient Rome served as inspiration for the great Italian architects of the 15th and 16th centuries. The first complete Renaissance square, the Piazza Ducale, was constructed between 1492 and 1498 in Vigevano in northern Italy. Its patron was Ludovico il Moro, and the architect is thought to have been Donato Bramante. The 3-acre piazza was inserted into an irregularly laid out Medieval town. It forms a perfect, elongated rectangle, surrounded on 3 sides by arcades on the first floor and housing on the second and third floors; behind the arcades are commercial uses. The piazza focuses toward a church, which was not completed until 1606. Although the footprint of the church predates the piazza and is off-angle to it, the problem is resolved by a curved, Baroque façade, which obscures the discontinuity. The ground surface of the piazza is paved in stone, as were the ancient Roman fora.

In the 17th century, the idea of the Italian Renaissance piazza moves on to other nations, including Spain and France. But these squares were fundamentally different from ancient Roman and Italian Renaissance precedents. They were built as real estate developments, predominately housing, which surrounded an open space.



The shape of the forum survives in the Piazza Erbe in Verona.



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The open space and the uniformity of the residential façades created an outdoor room that enhanced the value of the residential properties. A perfect example of this approach is the Place Vendôme in Paris, built in 1699, where the façade was constructed to surround the entire square; building lots were then sold behind the façade so the individual owners could construct their own dwellings.

The most important example of a residential square in Paris is the Place des Vosges, constructed for King Henry IV by Baptiste du Cerceau and inaugurated in 1612. The housing surrounds 4.85 acres of open space. The square is surrounded by 4 streets, 1 on each side adjacent to the housing. The buildings are 4 stories high with an arcaded base adjacent to shops and 3 stories of residential space above. When it was completed, the surface of the square was covered with sand and, perhaps, grass. It was used for dueling and jousting. By 1680, the open sandy lawn was replaced by formal plantings of clipped linden trees around the perimeter, with a circle of mature trees at the center. The major surface material was turf, divided by diagonal paths of stabilized gravel. An equestrian statue of Henry IV was placed at the center of the square, clearly indicating that it was a “place royale.”

This green residential square in Paris combines calm and tranquility with the activity of cafés and commerce accessed from the arcades on all 4 sides.

A major theoretical shift occurred when the continental piazza moved to London. Although the British appropriated the Italian name, “piazza,” for their early squares, the rules of engagement for the London residential square were somewhat different from the Italian and even the French predecessors. The space was always square or rectangular with public streets located on 4 sides, completely surrounding the green open space; the buildings themselves usually had identical façades and were exclusively residential — attached row houses. Whereas the Italian and French squares were public, the English green space was (and still is) intended only for the residents who lived at the perimeter.

The Bloomsbury District in London contains a series of these residential squares, mostly planned in the 18th century. The first of these, though, was Bloomsbury Square, a 2.5-acre expanse built in the 1660s. Also located within the Bloomsbury District is Bedford Square, the first and one of the most perfect of the garden squares; this 2.5-acre green space was constructed from 1776 to 1780.



Santa Fe, New Mexico, with its 2-acre square, owes its gridded layout to Spanish conquistadores who came in the early 17th century.

Around the central green in Bedford Square is a black iron fence with locked gates.

The planting in these squares illustrates the British obsession with gardens. Although the perimeter of the space is a perfect rectangle or square, none of that clarity was brought to the planting, which was more anecdotal — one resident liking plane trees, another preferring maples. There were also shrubs, grass, flowers, regular paths, irregular paths, etc. The effect was a sense of being in a country garden setting even though you were in the middle of the city. The order of the buildings was obscured by the plantings.

The New World

For urban open space in the new world, our European ancestors provided precedents for city green spaces that were imitated in North America. City greens in the United States are descendants of French, Spanish and British ancestors. Yet, when we look at the chronology, we see that significant American squares were constructed approximately at the same time as the European squares, with some examples constructed earlier.

Santa Fe Plaza: In 1609, Spanish conquistadors, led by Don Pedro de Peralta, laid out the city of Santa

Fe as a perfectly gridded Roman Colonial town. At the central crossing of the grid is the Santa Fe Plaza, a 2-acre green space, surrounded by 4 streets with a simple colonnade of commercial structures on the first level with other uses on the higher floors. The layout of the settlement closely resembles the Roman Colonial town prototype, not an English residential square. Because of the hot, dry climate in New Mexico, the planting is restrained, the pathways are formal, and the environment is rather dusty. This plaza was constructed before the Place des Vosges of 1612 in Paris and before the Plaza Mayor of 1617 in Madrid. The obelisk in the center of the historic plaza — called the Soldiers' Monument — was erected in 1866 to honor the men who died in New Mexican battles during the Civil War, and also those who died in various wars with Native American tribes.

The New Haven Green: In 1638, disgruntled Massachusetts Puritans, led by the Rev. John Davenport and the London merchant Theophilus Eaton, established the city of New Haven. By 1640, the town's theocratic government and 9-square grid plan were in place. The 16-acre central square of that plan is the New Haven Green, which was originally reserved as a common grazing ground. The other 8 squares are gridded with streets in a manner similar to the Roman Colonial town plan. The Green is surrounded



The New Haven Green is surrounded by 4 streets; an additional roadway (Temple Street) crosses the Green.

by 4 streets; an additional roadway (Temple Street) crosses the Green. On Temple Street are three churches (temples) that appear as objects in space on the Green. Over the years, the New Haven Green was used for many public purposes, including a cemetery and a parade ground. By the end of the 19th century, the Green had become a public space linked by diagonal paths, shaded by mature elms, with a green floor of grass. The prototypical American city green was developed on this site. Today, the Green is bordered by Yale College on the west and north, the New Haven Public Library on the north, banks and hotels on the north and east, City Hall on the east, and commercial buildings on the south. The New Haven Green continues to tie the gridded city together; it functions in a manner similar to the Roman Forum at the center of a Colonial town.

Rittenhouse Square: The 5-square, gridded plan for Philadelphia is one of the most famous city plans in North America. It was laid out in 1682 by William Penn and his surveyor, Thomas Holme. In many respects, the plan resembles a Roman Colonial town. The plan stretches from the Delaware River on the east to the Schuylkill River on the west. The north-south central street, Broad Street, is the cardo; the east-west central street, Market Street, is the decumanus. At the center of that intersection is an open space — perhaps

the forum — which is now the site of Philadelphia's grand city hall. The other 4 squares are evenly spaced around the center within the gridded plan.

Rittenhouse square is located in the southeast quadrant of Philadelphia. This 7-acre green space was established in 1683, in what would become a residential zone of the city. It is similar to a British residential square with 4 surrounding streets. The ground surface is grass, and the pathways are relatively formal, but this formality is obscured by informal planting. Today, Rittenhouse Square is surrounded by high rise apartments, an office tower, and two hotels. It is the urban anchor of its own neighborhood, and a clearly visible piece of the 5-square open space system of Philadelphia.

Jackson Square: In 1718, French settlers under the direction of Jean Baptiste Le Moyne established the city of New Orleans on the Mississippi River. By 1721, the original gridded plan for the city had been created. In most respects, the fortified French city resembles a Roman Colonial town with one major difference: the main open space is located at the edge of town on the Mississippi River, rather than at the center. Three sides of this 3-acre space are surrounded by symmetrical civic and religious buildings. There are roads on 4 sides, but no buildings along the river. The original urban plan brings a central road right into the square; as

now constructed, that central road divides around the Cathedral of St. Louis.

Jackson square resembles some of the patterns and planting of the Place des Vosges. There is a circle at the center, much larger in this case, the ground surface is lawn, and formally arranged trees (not clipped) are located at the perimeter. In the center of the circle is an equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson, the victor in the 1815 Battle of New Orleans. This square combines traditions from Parisian Renaissance squares of the 17th century and Roman Colonial planning strategies from more than 2,000 years ago.

Savannah Squares: George Oglethorpe laid out the plan for Savannah in 1733. It is a truly original use of the grid and open green squares. The original plan included 4 open squares; each was surrounded by 8 blocks for residential construction. Each unit or “ward” was 10 acres in area; each square was approximately 200 feet east-west and between 100 and 300 feet north-south. The average square is 1 acre. The original plan was a method for laying out the city that could be expanded at will. Although the project began with only 4 squares, by 1851 there were 24 squares and approximately 292 blocks for development.

The character of the individual green squares varies. Most are relatively informal, and are dominated by the irregular shapes of live oaks and Spanish moss. The whole system for Savannah resembles the green squares of the Bloomsbury District of London with axial streets connecting the greens, creating a new and original tapestry of green space for the city.

Gramercy Park: In 1832, Samuel B. Ruggles, a developer and advocate of open space, established a 2-acre green space known as Gramercy Park. The Park is one of New York City’s first residential squares. It is bordered on the south by East 20th Street, on the north by East 21st Street, and is centered on Lexington Avenue. It is surrounded on 4 sides by residential buildings of similar scale, but each building is different in appearance from its neighbors. As a private, grass-covered open space, Gramercy Park is enclosed by an iron fence, and each of the property owners has a key to the gates.

The rectangular shape of the park, elongated in the east-west direction, is determined by the Commissioner’s Grid for New York City, which in 1811 established a pattern of streets, avenues, and elongated blocks that covers most of Manhattan Island. The planting of deciduous trees is largely informal, but a central circle and formal paths are located on the axis of Lexington Avenue.

The circle contains a statue of the American actor Edwin Booth. Gramercy Park resembles an English residential square of the 17th or 18th century.



Rittenhouse square is the urban anchor of its own neighborhood.



Jackson Square combines traditions from Parisian Renaissance squares of the 17th century and Roman Colonial planning strategies.



The character of Savannah Squares vary but most are relatively informal, and are dominated by the irregular shapes of live oaks and Spanish moss.



One of New York City's first residential squares. Surrounded by residential buildings on four sides, the grass-covered open space is enclosed with an iron fence. Each property owner has a key to the gates.

Observations

The first 5 American squares considered in this article were laid out between 1609 and 1721. In many ways, these squares are not simply descendants of the European tradition, they are part of it. In fact, some of the American squares predate similar squares in Europe.

Four of the 6 squares in the New World — Santa Fe Plaza, The New Haven Green, Rittenhouse Square, and Jackson Square — are clearly within the tradition of Roman Colonial town planning, the gridded plan with the forum at the center or, in these cases, the green square at the center. The two exceptions — Savannah and Gramercy Park — come from other gridded methodologies. George Oglethorpe invented his own new tapestry, and Gramercy Park is derived from the simplicity of the Commissioner's Grid for New York City.

By definition, all the squares are green, whether planted formally or informally, and the surface of the ground is mostly grass. The path layout in the squares varies considerably; it includes diagonal paths, axial paths, circular patterns, curved patterns, regular patterns, and irregular patterns.

Of all the squares, only Jackson Square resembles the European tradition of identical or choreographed built edges at the perimeter. The other five all have built edges, but those edges are varied and irregular. As is the custom here in America, we resist the formality of Paris and London with their consistently designed architectural edges for squares and boulevards.

What emerges is our own tradition — a tradition of green outdoor rooms in a gridded urban setting, surrounded by streets and somewhat irregular buildings that define the edges. Most of the spaces are planted in an unpretentious manner. We are part of a European

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