

The Importance of Gathering Places – Especially in a World Changed by COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has left many of our gathering places devoid of people, but we will be back

By Mark Schnell



It's almost surreal to look back on the "shelter in place" experience of one year ago in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the continuing pandemic, Florida is basically without restrictions at this point, so the contrast between now and then is especially stark.

I'd like to say that my time stuck at home one year ago provided the time and space to read some books collecting dust on my shelf, clean out my closet, and get some exercise. I guess one out of three wasn't too bad. (I managed to clean out my closet.)

I thought I'd even have some time to do some big strategic thinking for my urban design firm. I'd really take a moment, step back, and give some quality thought to the future of my firm. That didn't happen either, thanks to the fact that I had plenty of ongoing work. And "plenty" may not fully describe it. Within several weeks, it became obvious that something remarkable was happening with the real estate markets here on 30A and on the Texas coast where I do so much of my urban design work. Just about everyone, it seems, who had been thinking about buying or building a house at the beach suddenly jumped in with both feet. This is what's known as a "good problem to have" for someone in the design business, but it has also (to borrow another phrase) left me "drinking out of a fire hose." (I'm very thankful for all of the work, especially at a time when so many people are struggling.)

I can't say I had ever saw a pandemic-induced rush on beach town real estate coming, but then again, I never saw the pandemic coming in the first place.

In retrospect, the lockdown weeks – or were they months? – did give me a brief opportunity to think (at least before the real estate boom began in earnest). There was one very odd thing that came to mind in those strangely quiet days: the "hair metal" band Cinderella.

Specifically, I thought about the band's 1989 power ballad "Don't Know What You've Got (Till It's Gone)."

It's not that it's a particularly good song. Granted, it's fun in an 80s nostalgia sort of way, but that's about it. But I was in high school when it hit the radio, and songs from that time in one's life have a way of resurfacing whether they are any good or not. Please accept my apologies if I've lodged the song in your head just by mentioning it.

But don't worry, I was not sitting around the house listening to it on repeat. I never sank that low. But the song's title and chorus entered my head when I saw photos of famous plazas and streets around the world: the Piazza Navona in Rome, Times Square in New York City, the Champs Elysees in Paris, and many more. There were also photos of cafes, stadiums, and religious sites. All were devoid of people thanks to the quarantines and "shelter in place" orders resulting from the pandemic.

At the time, I saw our very own beloved gathering space – Central Square and the amphitheater in Seaside – without a single soul. There wasn't a car or bike either, outside of an occasional sheriff's



Seaside in April of 2020 was relatively quiet, due to the restrictions on gathering places imposed in Seaside. Photo by Mark Schnell

vehicle or a long lost bike. It was basically empty. That kind of emptiness was once a little more commonplace when South Walton was a much more seasonal destination, but it's a rare sight now, and unthinkable during spring break. And our other popular gathering space – the beach – was closed and empty for a time as well.

There are very good and important reasons why those spaces were closed. We were faced with an unknown virus (that still hasn't subsided) and the prospect of (seemingly) half the Southeast descending upon our shores, all at the same time. You won't find me second guessing those decisions.

But it still hurt to see empty gathering places that are normally electric and full of life. I love these places and seek them out. I've studied them and designed them. I'm fully aware of their importance. Even so, there are still times when you "don't know what you've got 'til it's gone." That was one of them.

Generally speaking, we are social creatures. People attract more people. I know there are plenty of introverted people in our world who don't always love to spend time in a public gathering place, but I think there's a social gene embedded in our DNA nonetheless. We have a deep seated need to gather.

Naturally, many of the best gathering places are in our dense walkable cities and towns. Over the last year, there were a few pundits who pointed to density as a culprit in the pandemic and suggested that we need to spread out, like in the suburbs, to avoid another pandemic in the future. Thankfully, that idea has been debunked: there have been higher rates of COVID-19 in some the country's lowest density areas – the Dakotas, for example – than we've had in the dense cities.

There are also reports of an exodus from the big cities to suburban and rural areas. That exodus has turned out to be largely anecdotal and probably not as large as people think (although it's true that many people are buying or using second homes during the pandemic). I expect there to be a mild contraction, followed by a strong recovery for places like New York and San Francisco. Why? The advantages of our most walkable mixed-use cities will continue to be a strong draw.

No, dense walkable cities and towns are not the problem, and they are not dead. In fact, they offer just about everything I missed during the lockdown, and still miss today: the energy, the creativity, the busy restaurants and bars, the concerts and festivals, the sporting

events, and of course, the people. We'll need those things back if we are to truly heal from this pandemic. Human connection and shared experiences help us maintain our mental health, and they are part of the glue that bonds our society.

If there's anything those empty gathering spaces illustrated to me, as an urban designer, it's that we've actually underestimated their importance. In the past 90 years or so, Americans have created more and more places that isolate people from one another. We've created countless places where one is dependent on a car for everything in life. We've spread out across the land to such an extent that human interaction is often severely limited. Those small

interactions that walkable mixed-use communities offer – waving at a neighbor, a quick conversation on the sidewalk, chance encounters with friends – are too rare in this time of sprawl. As a result, too many of our communities have a lot of lonely people.

It might say something about my age that I first thought of the Cinderella song rather than another song featuring the same phrase. In Joni Mitchell's 1970 song "Big Yellow Taxi," she sang:

*Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
'Till it's gone
They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot*

When we get past this horrible pandemic, let's build fewer parking lots and more places for people to gather. And if we're going to pave anything, let's be sure that it's as wonderful and lovable as an Italian piazza. And when we do, I look forward to seeing you there. 🍷

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