

Plaza: Reviving the heart of Taos

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Reviving *el corazón* : Part three of a series

Taos Pharmacy owner Jake Mossman remembers sipping milkshakes and pumping coins into the jukebox at the Plaza drug store after school when he was a kid. He remembers going to the movies at the Plaza theater. He remembers grocery shopping with his grandma at the Plaza market.

“The Plaza was the center of everything in terms of commerce,” Mossman says.

As the one-time heart of the community, Taos Plaza earned the moniker “*el corazón de Taos*.” But according to some locals, that heart is in need of a strong shock to get it beating again.

Decades ago, the Plaza had everything a shopper needed: a bank, two pharmacies, clothing stores, a couple cafés, a theater, the county courthouse and even a bar or two.

And though the concentration of businesses made running errands convenient, Mossman says it served as a communal meeting place as well.

“The old men would sit on the Plaza and play this gambling game,” he remembers. “They’d catch up on the gossip while people were shopping around the Plaza. It was very, very different from how it is now.”

Today, Taos Plaza is a much bigger draw for those from out of town than for locals. During the tourist season, the Plaza fills with pedestrians wandering into souvenir shops, or browsing the galleries and restaurants nearby.

But ask many Taos-ers, and they’ll say they avoid it. It’s too touristy, they complain. Too congested.

Nearly all of the shops on the Plaza are dedicated to out-of-towners, and the two buildings that have the greatest cultural significance and the potential to draw locals — the old county courthouse and the theater — are closed.

Mossman from Taos Pharmacy insists that his fond memories of the Plaza as a communal center are more than just nostalgia for the good ol’ days. “People might wax nostalgically on the way things were, but I think they are really a symbol of a much deeper loss and a much more sinister change in our society,” he says. “We’re losing more than just a place to gather and talk and go shop. We’re losing our individuality in the process.”

Big transitions

Business owners Tom and Barbara McCarthy both have deep roots on Taos Plaza.

Tom McCarthy's family started its first business there in 1904. They ran a mercantile store until the '40s, and operated a five-and-dime shop with a hardware store in the basement for decades.

But times changed.

By the '70s and early '80s, tourism was catching on as a major industry in Taos County. Galleries and souvenir stores started filling spaces in the center of town, and longtime local merchants started moving to locations north and south along Paseo del Pueblo.

Tom McCarthy says new chain stores drew customers off the main square. They also put some suppliers and distributors out of business, making it tougher for local business owners to get their merchandise. And as cars became more commonplace in town, shoppers were less inclined to fight traffic and look for a parking spot in and around the Plaza. Businesses needed easy access and plentiful parking, and they didn't have it downtown.

Business owners who stayed on the Plaza, had to make a choice: Fight the changes or adapt. At El Mercado, one of the McCarthys' Plaza locations, they eventually had to stop selling hardware and start selling moccasins and souvenirs.

University of New Mexico anthropology professor and Taos native Sylvia Rodriguez has written about Taos, its Plaza, and how tourism has affected the community. She says she would love to see life and local flavor brought back to Taos Plaza, and she thinks the key is for shops and eateries to once again appeal to Taos-ers as much as to tourists.

"I think the only way to turn Taos Plaza back into a living, beating heart of the community is to put in businesses that cater to the local people — all of them, whether we're talking about Indians or Anglos or Hispanos," she says. "But that might not be economically possible."

T-shirts and moccasins

The economic realities of downtown undoubtedly complicate efforts to revitalization.

To start, rents are significantly higher compared to other parts of town. About 500 square feet on the Plaza can go for \$2,000 a month. The same amount of space a couple miles down Paseo del Pueblo — with easier access and parking — can be had for just \$500 a month.

While the McCarthys and other landlords have worked with tenants, rent can still prove daunting for businesses.

Another challenge might be that the buildings surrounding the Plaza are in the hands of a very few owners. Business licenses show that T-Bird Inc. — owned by out-of-town businessman George Cook — operates three stores: Taos Trading Co., Taos Mercantile and Taos Cowboy. The McCarthys own and rent out several spaces on the Plaza, and they still operate El Mercado, though they devote more of their time to their bed and breakfast down Kit Carson Road.

The McCarthys bemoan the fact that there isn't much diversity in merchandise on the Plaza. Most stores stick to the same basic recipe of Indian jewelry, T-shirts and souvenirs — not the kinds of things that draw locals. But they say it's hard for businesses to break from the formula that is at least keeping them afloat in hard economic times. At El Mercado, Tom McCarthy said the best selling items are still T-shirts.

Still a draw

Marc Coan has owned "Made in New Mexico" for about 10 years. Though he admits that business has been tough lately and visitors in his store down, he still thinks the Plaza is a major draw. "This is actually a healthy downtown when you look at the number of vacancies compared to so many other small towns," Coan says.

Coan doesn't buy into the nostalgia of looking at what Taos Plaza used to be. But he does think there is the potential to do something different.

For years, upstart business owners as well as longtime residents have floated proposals on how to change or improve the look of the Plaza: Get rid of the brick and plant grass. Block off access for traffic and turn it into a pedestrian park. Improve gutters and remove the parking spaces to give businesses a 10-foot buffer between the sidewalk and the street.

A week-long "charrette" last year that included community meetings and studies by design experts took inventory of the pros and cons of downtown Taos and tried to hear what the community wanted.

Without fail, suggestions for "improvements" tend to stir up controversy from various parts of the community, and most proposals have been met with opposition from some businesses unwilling to break from the status quo. They've argued that changes would hurt their businesses, and they point to examples in other cities where pedestrian malls have failed miserably.

Coan isn't sure a complete overhaul of the Plaza is necessary, but he does think it would be nice for businesses to have the space in front of their shops. Street cafés could set up outside, performers could work for tips and create a more lively environment, and even locals might have an interest in coming back downtown.

As many shop owners recognize the need to drum up business, some progress has already been made in renewing the focus on downtown. Business owners scheduled art walks and block parties throughout the summer, and events like Taos Plaza Live! have succeeded in shunning the Plaza's stigma as the lifeless center of town and drawing consistent crowds of Taosenos.