

# GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY PUBLIC PLAZA

## Design Workshop Summary

ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

JUNE 21, 2007

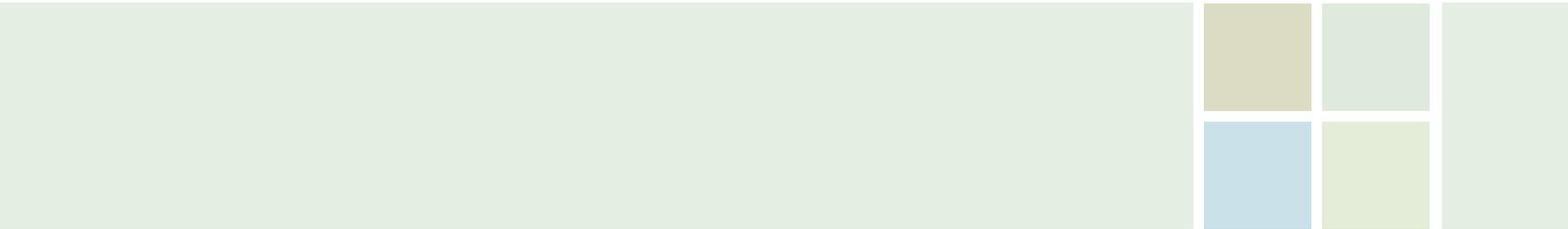
PREPARED BY



George Mason University Public Plaza  
Design Workshop Summary  
Arlington, Virginia  
June 21, 2007



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# INTRODUCTION

## CHARRETTE SUMMARY

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“...the private university space evolves into a public front door, as a welcoming gateway and entrance to the campus; a place where the community would feel invited into the plaza space in particular and onto the campus as a whole.”

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On June 21, 2007, PPS was invited to facilitate a discussion between GMU and Arlington County about the potential use, design, program, and management of a future plaza, planned by the University as part of its Phase 2 facilities expansion.

Steve Davies, a Senior Vice President with PPS, started the workshop with a powerpoint show providing case examples of best practices in public space design, campus public space design, and the qualities of successful places and civic squares. Using the concept diagram of the plaza, developed by the SmithGroup, the project architects, Steve and Cynthia Nikitin divided the plaza into three separate zones for the purpose of the facilitated group discussion with followed. The three zones were the Arrival Zone (Zone 1) the Central Plaza (Zone 2) and the Arcade/Lobby Zone (Zone 3). The discussion focused on brainstorming a list of issues of concern for each zone, opportunities for uses, activities, amenities, and design features for each area and last, management and operational considerations with regard to how partners and programming could be brought together to make these areas function effectively.

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### Key Issues

Key issues of concern raised during the facilitated discussion focused on how the plaza will function, who will use it, how it will be used both by students the general public. Several design principles for the plaza emerged from this dialogue as well:

- **A flexible space:** First among them was the need to design a space that was flexible and while providing amenities such as trees, shade, seating and food, that

also could be used as a performance, event, festival, and gathering place for students and residents alike.

- **A welcoming space:** Second was a desire to design the edge of the plaza, where the private university space evolves into a public front door, as a welcoming gateway and entrance to the campus; a place where the community would feel invited into the plaza space in particular and onto the campus as a whole.
- **A place to meet:** Third was to create a vital, active space that encourages people to meet, gather and interact and that brings people and ideas together. This plaza is being conceived of as the University’s main “quad” and public space. With the future construction of nine to thirteen stories of mixed use, residential, retail and commercial development across Fairfax Avenue from the Plaza, there will be an 24/7 audience for the space who, as they become accustomed to taking part in events and use the amenities that the plaza and auditorium will provide, could be approached to take formal ownership responsibility for it, if it can serve as a shared, neighborhood “commons.”

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### The Power of 10

In the larger context of Arlington County, this plaza could tie into the Market Square proposed for Fairfax Drive between 10th Street North and Wilson Boulevard (a subject of a previous workshop this year by PPS for Arlington County Economic Development). Thus the GMU plaza could be one part of a “necklace” of public spaces and destinations that enhance the whole value and level of activity in Clarendon and Virginia Square.



This “necklace” ties into the concept of utilizing the “Power of Ten” to create great places in Arlington County. As a planning approach, the “Power of Ten” refers generally to the ultimate goals of variety and choice. When we talk about the “Power of Ten,” we’re stressing the fact that Placemaking can be accomplished at a variety of scales and locations. The underlying concept is that to build our cities around places, it’s not enough to have a single use dominate in a particular place, rather a diverse array of activities in which people can engage is required. It’s not enough to have just one great place in a neighborhood – a number of them are needed in order to create a truly lively town center. It’s not enough to have one superior neighborhood in a city – people all over town need to have close-to-home opportunities to take pleasure in public life.

## BACKGROUND

### What Makes a Great Place?

Public places are a stage for our public lives. They are the parks where celebrations are held, where marathons end, and where cultures mix. They are the streets and sidewalks in front of homes and businesses where friends run into each other and where exchanges both social and economic take place. They are the “front porches” of our public institutions where we interact with each other and with government. When cities and neighborhoods have thriving public spaces, residents have a strong sense of community; conversely, when they are lacking, they may feel less connected to each other.

PPS has identified four qualities that Make Places Great. These qualities, which were described during the powerpoint show, need to be incorporated into the planning and design of the new plaza:

- **Sociability.** When people see friends, meet and greet their neighbors, and feel comfortable interacting with strangers, they tend to feel a stronger sense of place or attachment to their community - and to the place that fosters these types of social activities. Therefore, starting with the people and thinking about sociability first helps keep in mind that this will be a place for people; then, everything else should be designed to support that.
- **Activities and Uses.** Having something to do gives people a reason to come to a place - and to return again and again. When there is nothing to do, a space will remain empty, which can lead to other problems. In planning for uses and activities, it is important to consider a wide range of activities for: men and women, people of different ages, different times of day and times of year, and for people alone as well as in groups.
- **Comfort and Image.** Whether a space is comfortable and has a good image and identity is key to its success. Comfort includes perceptions about safety, cleanliness, and the availability of places to sit – the importance of giving people the choice to sit where they want is generally underestimated. Creating a good image can mean keeping a place clean and well maintained, as well as fostering a sense of identity.
- **Access & Linkages.** A successful public space is easy to get to and get through; it is visible both from a distance and up close. The edges of a space are important as well: for instance, a row of shops along a street is more interesting and generally safer to walk by than a blank wall or empty lot. Accessible spaces have a high parking turnover and, ideally, are convenient to public transit and support walking and biking. Since George Mason University is located in a key area of Arlington, access and linkages to the surrounding areas should be strongly considered.

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## Successful Public Spaces: Where “Town meets Gown”

When considering the qualities of a great campus, we take the Power of Ten and the Qualities of Place one step further. As presented by PPS and in a recent bulletin about successful campus planning, there are six functions that successful campuses serve:

### 1. THEY BRING PEOPLE AND IDEAS TOGETHER

Too often, faculty and students retreat into their own disciplines, each hidden away in its own separate building. Students need to interact with faculty and in turn the entire university needs to interact with the broader community.

### 2. THEY ARE PLACES, NOT JUST FACILITIES

The key to making campuses more than the sum of their parts is an important idea that PPS calls triangulation. This simply means clustering activities together to create a busy, dynamic place for many different types of people at different times of day. For example, a terrace cafeteria at the student union could “triangulate” with a nearby garden and rotating exhibits from the campus art collection. Combining these elements that would normally be scattered creates a far busier and more exciting place than any one of those uses by itself.

### 3. SUCCESSFUL CAMPUSES BALANCE CONCERNS ABOUT FLEXIBILITY VS. CONTROL

Sensible management of public uses can allow colleges to address security and control issues, while still encouraging public access and enjoyment of a campus public spaces..

### 4. SUCCESSFUL CAMPUSES IMPROVE THE TOWN/ GOWN RELATIONSHIP

A university and the surrounding community boost each other when they cooperate on a wide range of matters. The happy result is often a strong local economy with a highly skilled workforce and cutting edge businesses spun off through the presence of entrepreneurial professors and graduate students.

### 5. CAMPUSES CAN SOW THE SEEDS OF SUSTAINABILITY

As incubators of innovative ideas, universities are poised to pioneer sustainable building practices for the future. Being green is not just about the facility itself but about how the building relates to the rest of the campus. A true green building, for instance, would be sited in such a way that people would typically walk there rather than drive.

### 6. WELL DESIGNED CAMPUSES CAN SOLVE TRAFFIC AND PARKING WOES

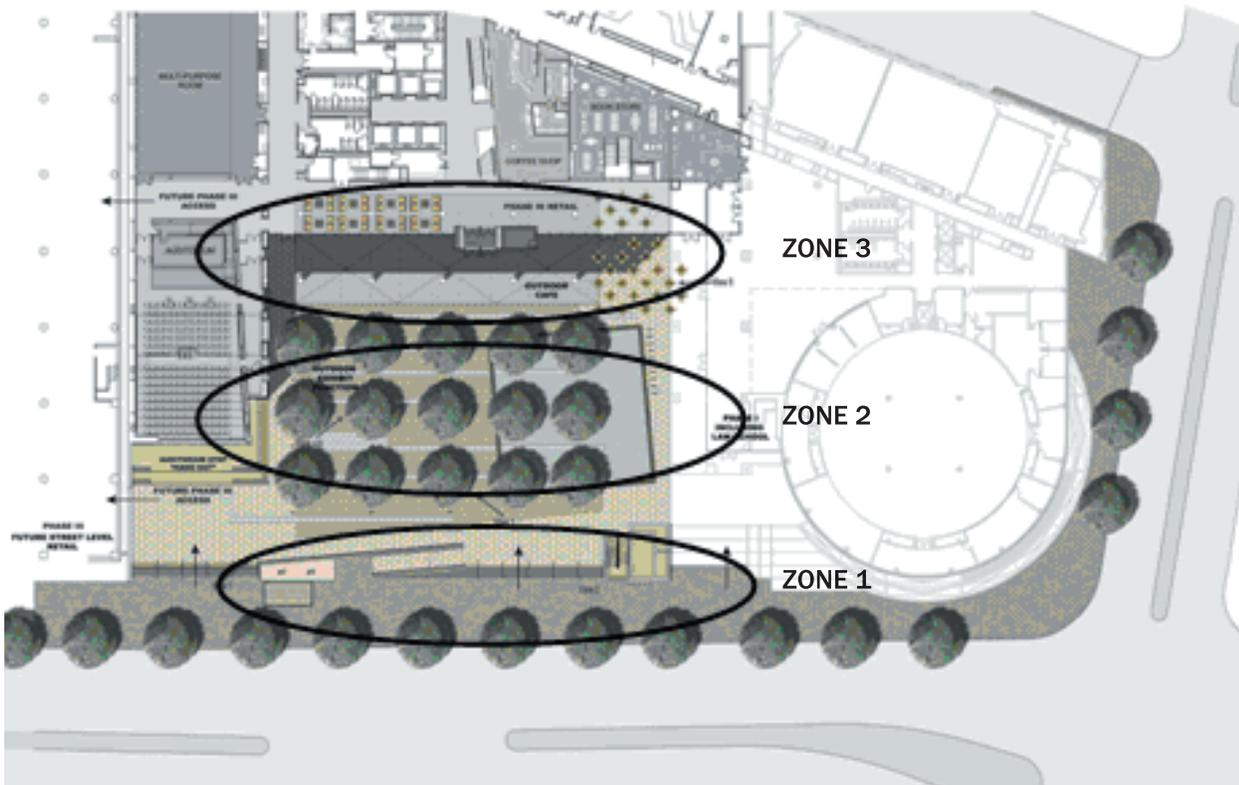
Too much accommodating the automobile often results in campuses becoming drab, uninspiring places sealed off from the life of the community around it. Promoting walking, biking, and transit, on the other hand, connects the life of the campus to the life of the community.



## WORKSHOP SUMMARY

To focus the discussion, PPS divided the plaza into three zones (see attached map) of the plaza. Zone 1, the “Arrival Zone,” includes the steps and transition from the sidewalk to the plaza as well as the exterior of the Auditorium. Zone 2 is the central, main activity area of the plaza. Finally, Zone 3 consists of the arcade and the adjacent interior lobby spaces, including the bookstore and coffee shop.

Each zone is discussed below. Issues are consolidated comments and questions that were raised by participants in the workshop. Opportunities are then presented, again, as identified at the workshop. It should be noted that the next step in the process is to prioritize and evaluate these opportunities.





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## Zone 1 (Arrival Zone)

### ISSUE:

“The stairs define the façade of the plaza, but the ramps preclude the convenient access of the users. The stairs seem to create a barrier that will deter interaction between the street and the plaza. How can you better attract people into the plaza?”

### OPPORTUNITIES:

- Create a mosaic on the face of the wall of the ventilation shaft from the parking garage to “soften it;”
- Add a seating ledge in front of this wall;
- Design the handicapped ramp so that it creates less of a barrier;
- Change the depth of treads/height of risers to make steps more gradual;
- Coordinate with parking garage clearances and required spaces
- Extend steps into the sidewalk area or into the plaza;
- Use public art or fountains as gateways, directional elements which draw people in; and
- Have uses on the plaza spill out on to the sidewalk as appropriate.

### ISSUE:

“Inaccessibility of the theater/auditorium”: The community will have access to dedicated events such as: 1) University events, 2) community events, 3) private events. Is there a way to change the access to the auditorium and open it up, visually, to the community and give it more of a street presence?”

### OPPORTUNITIES:

- Create a direct entrance off of the plaza by expanding the existing exit doors, or by creating an atrium structure off of the auditorium with an entrance from the plaza that channels circulation around the corner to the “real” entrance to the auditorium towards the back of the plaza;
- Use the eastern façade of the auditorium as an external stage, by extending the steps into the plaza towards the sidewalk;
- Expand the uses and activities within the auditorium out onto the public plaza;
- Project movies on the building exterior including previously taped performances and events.

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## Zone 2 (The Central Plaza)

### ISSUE:

“The plaza looks like a privatized outdoor lobby space for the university. It is not very welcoming as proposed. How can the plaza create a sense of community and a place that links ‘town and gown’?”

### OPPORTUNITIES:

- The community vision has been for Virginia Square to become an arts and entertainment district. The plaza could become a focal point for the art;
- Make this a central gathering place for the Rosslyn/Ballston corridor. Activate the central plaza, providing uses more inviting to the public and which bring the community and student body together. Ideas suggested included music, art shows, farmers market, arts and craft markets, concerts, jugglers, etc.;

- Turn it into a summer performing arts venue for GMU and the community;
- Use electronic signage, digital TVs; electronic visuals; large scale electronic screens for sharing information about activities at the university, screening films, etc., but no commercial advertising should be allowed;
- Provide space for speakers, moot court, conflict resolution sessions for the adjudication of issues, debates, and university-wide educational activities;
- Include an outdoor meditation area;
- Promote the space so that people know it's an active space;
- Add more color to the plaza through design elements, shade structures, awnings, night lighting and backlighting of building interiors, and by painting interior walls;
- Develop a public art presence using permanent art, rotating temporary art, using art to create virtual gateways, and through collaborations/mentoring with community art organizations, such as the Maury Arts Center;
- Hang decorative banners in the space to catch people's attention;
- Provide a focal point within the plaza – fountain, artwork, vending (coffee kiosk).

#### ISSUE:

“Landscape features may not support the activities we have discussed. How much of a hard surface for the plaza do you need? How much grass surface? Will the grove of trees obstruct activities? Why is the grass area angled?”

#### OPPORTUNITIES:

- Identify all the uses people would like to use the plaza for, and then design the elements of the plaza around those uses – identifying where infrastructure may be required (power, sound system) to facilitate the staging of events. Rather than starting with the trees, which are needed to provide shade, start with the program of uses and activities and then site the trees around the program;
- Create a larger flexible (green) space in the middle – activate the corners and leave the center more flexible and open. (This may conflict with another idea to create a central focal point for the plaza.);
- Provide some accessible grass areas, but make the grass a functional part of the plaza;
- Consider a few raised planting beds with trees and grass in them, as an alternative to a grid of trees. These could provide a variety of places for people to sit. That is, people could step up onto the grass and sit under a tree, and others could sit along the edge of the bed (18 to 24 inches is a comfortable height for a sit wall).

#### ISSUE:

“There are 2500 of students on campus, and this will be the only large, common gathering place. What will students do in the plaza?”

#### OPPORTUNITIES:

- The University needs to involve students in brainstorming ideas for and shaping the program for the plaza. They could start by bringing representatives of campus clubs, student associations and organizations together for focus groups to brainstorm suggestions;

- Students often cluster together in small groups (3-4) before classes; they also have solitary seating and studying needs. Therefore, a variety of places for people to gather, in small as well as larger groups, needs to be provided;
- Create opportunities for outdoor classrooms (15-20 people);
- Provide space for outdoor dining in small groups or alone: provide tables, including picnic tables and table umbrellas with moveable seating;
- Host theme days to enliven the plaza – table tennis tournaments, croquet tournaments, and even a mock “beach” with sand, cabanas, and beach chairs;
- Noon time readings and book signing by authors, tied to coursework;
- Acoustical concerts;
- Move the student club fair to the plaza;
- Sponsor Social happy hours, BBQs, and other events to bring students together;
- Connect plaza events with academic departments: speeches, performances, screenings, etc.
- Place benches under and around trees;
- Provide a semi-permanent shade structure for the plaza. For example, tents and brightly colored tensile structures could remain in place from April through October;
- Provide some grassy lawn areas;
- Cut steps into the grass beds so they can be easily accessed;
- Program lawn games such as croquet and lawn bowling for these areas;
- Plant larger trees on the south side of the plaza to cast their shade over more of the space;
- Conduct a sun/shade analysis of the plaza to determine where trees can be most effective in providing cooling shade.

## ISSUE

“If there’s no shade, the plaza, which is south facing, will be uninviting to use in the summer. How can this impact be mitigated and the plaza not become a ‘heat island?’”

## OPPORTUNITIES:

- Trees are needed, but they should be appropriately and strategically placed so that they provide the most shade and do not preclude the programming of activities;
- Celebrate George Mason—the man, the historical figure—through art. Other campuses have a statue that they dress up for special events, such as graduation and homecoming day;
- Hold ceremonial celebrations (living history) to celebrate the founder;
- Inscribe George Mason quotes on blank walls, stair risers and walls;

## ISSUE:

“There’s nothing that says GMU is ‘this’, or that Virginia Square is ‘that’. Nothing here provides a sense of identity. How can the design of the plaza create a unique identity, visible presence, and image for the area?”

## OPPORTUNITIES:

- Prepare interpretive graphics that can be seen from the plaza through the glass walls of the library and lounge arcade at the first floor;
- Provide plaques, inscriptions, information to promote values, history, and activities of GMU to the public and pedestrians walking by.

**ISSUE:**

“There need to be more places to sit.”

**OPPORTUNITIES:**

- Make steps more “sittable;”
- Remove metal grates under trees so people can sit under them, and provide planters with ledges;
- Add moveable chairs;
- Provide fun seating: Scales of Justice bench (like a seesaw), porch swings, and/or hammocks.

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### Zone 3 (Arcade/Lobby Zone)

**ISSUE:**

“The retail/public uses (coffee shop, bookstore) are too ‘tucked into the building.’ How can the edge uses be strengthened and brought forward into the plaza?”

**OPPORTUNITIES:**

- Extend the influence of these businesses into the plaza: for example, do book signings in the plaza;
- Activate the edge of the plaza along the existing law school. Consider bringing law library uses and resources out onto the plaza;

- Put satellite retail uses in the plaza (i.e., a coffee kiosk or cart operated by nearby Murky Coffee);
- Provide visible signs for the coffee shop and bookstore on the exterior façade of the building;
- Provide outdoor display areas (book carts) and café seating;
- Consider opportunities for efficient yet decorative lighting to reinforce site identity at night.
- Provide a variety of seating opportunities inside the lobby area as well as inside the law school;
- Create an indoor gallery space for rotating exhibitions.

**ISSUE:**

“The arcade that will incorporate the bookstore and coffee shop feels disconnected from the plaza: what is supposed to go on here?”

**OPPORTUNITIES:**

- Think of the arcade more as a porch – better connected (more doors, folding or sliding glass walls) to interior seating areas, café seating, etc., that can expand into the arcade;
- Provide special seating, such as porch swings, hammocks or “scales of justice” seating;
- Build in low walls along the edge of the arcade that people can sit behind and look out over the plaza;
- Design the ceiling of the arcade with a shape and architectural detail so that it creates the sense of a room;
- Provide additional architectural/cove lighting to brighten the arcade.

## ISSUE:

“We need to think about not only daytime but evening/night light, as well. How can the façade make the building feel as open as possible and attract and support use at night?”

## OPPORTUNITIES:

- Use clear glass on the façade of the auditorium building
- Create dramatic night lighting effects;
- Provide colors and artwork on the interior of the building that are visible at night;
- Provide more balcony spaces overlooking the plaza; make existing balcony spaces usable (with seating, etc.);
- Have the uses inside the law school and law library spill out onto the plaza.

- Community Partners: Ballston/VA Square Partnership, Maury Arts Center, Arlington Co. Parks & Recreation, WMATA, DOT, Walk Arlington/Bike Arlington, Food vendors from the local restaurants? (liability issues to work out, it can be done – just need to plan for it); Rick Davis and the Black Box theater, Arlington Learning & Retirement Institution; Commission for the Arts (Wes Mac-Adam).

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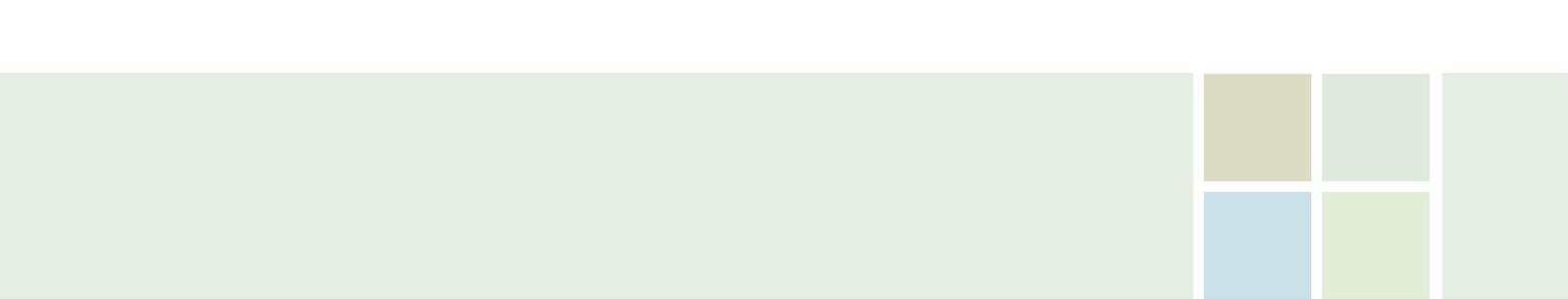
## Operation & Management

### ISSUES:

“Who are the partners/partnerships that should play a role in this plaza?”

### OPPORTUNITIES:

- GMU partners – Office of Student Life, Academic Units including schools of Law and Conflict Resolution, GMU Foundation. Events Management, College of Visual & Performing Arts, Rick Davis (Black Box theater?), Campus Food Services, Bookstore, Street vendor carts (menu options are amazing – think creatively), GMU Community Advisory Board (Scott McGeary), Office of Professional Continuing Education, Campus Community Advisory Board;



## NEXT STEPS

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Most of the opportunities identified can potentially be incorporated into the design of the plaza, and the GMU/Arlington County Joint Advisory Board and a working group formed out of this workshop can help take the process further.

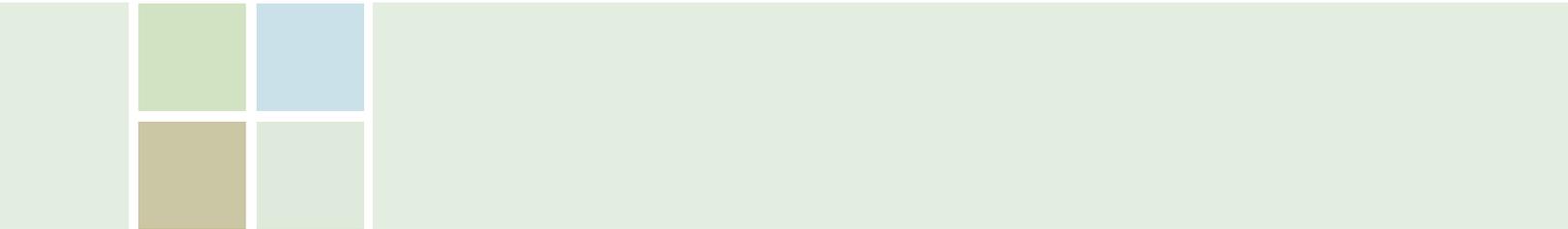
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In PPS's view the workshop successfully brought together diverse stakeholders and provided an opportunity to candidly identify issues and opportunities. The consensus was that most of the opportunities identified could potentially be incorporated into the design of the plaza, and that the GMU/Arlington County Joint Advisory Board and a working group formed out of this workshop could help take the process further. However, further work needs to be done to refine the program and modify the design to reflect that program.

PPS recommends three steps be taken before the plaza design is further modified:

- Create an opportunity for students (and community stakeholders) to become involved in developing ideas and opportunities for the plaza, through a similar workshop;
- Develop a more formal program for the plaza, working with the GMU/Arlington County Joint Advisory Board and the project architects to prioritize and refine opportunities;
- Map out proposed activities (concerts, speeches, small classes, games, etc.) so it is better understood how these activities could be organized on the plaza.

This program can then be used to make the necessary design modifications to the plaza, as well as to help provide the framework for the ultimate management of the space by the university in partnership with the Virginia Square community.



## ATTENDEES

1. Roberto Moranchel, *Arlington County*
2. Dennis Burr, *Arlington County*
3. Welmoed Laanstra, *Arlington County*
4. Angela Adams, *Arlington County*
5. Cindy Richmond, *Arlington County*
6. Terry Holzheimer, *Arlington County*
7. Jennifer Ives, *Arlington County*
8. David Goodman, *Arlington County*
9. Anthony Fusarelli, *Arlington County*
10. Jennifer Smith, *Arlington County*
11. Gabriela Acurio, *Arlington County*
12. Rich Dooley, *Arlington County*
13. Carol Ann Perovshek, *Arlington County*
14. Claude Williamson, *Arlington County*
15. David Bean, *Arlington County*
16. Julie Mangis, *Arlington County*
17. Inta Malis, *Arlington County*
18. Larry Czarda, *GMU*
19. Lillian Arevalo, *GMU*
20. Lori Cohen, *GMU*
21. Karen Pirhalla, *GMU*
22. Walter Kravitz, *GMU*
23. Chuck Fanshaw, *GMU*
24. Allen Daytner, *GMU*
25. David Tjandra, *Smith Group*
26. Eai chul Chun, *Smith Group*
27. Bob Nashed, *Smith Group*
28. Steve Davies, *PPS*
29. Cynthia Nikitin, *PPS*