

SOMETIMES A GREAT PLAZA

The quest to turn Kesey Square into a vibrant public space

BY AMY SCHNEIDER

In ancient times, a traditional Roman town often had two major streets: the *cardo* and the *decumanus*. Where those two streets intersected, Romans built a forum or public space that marked the intersection as significant.

In Eugene, says UO professor of architecture James Tice, Willamette Street is the *cardo*, and Broadway is the *decumanus*.

"Whether people know it or not, the placement of Kesey Square is highly appropriate, and it's an echo of that impulse to mark those two important streets," Tice says.

As an urban designer with an eye on history, Tice has a unique perspective on a city's open spaces.

"I like to think of a square like Kesey Square as a kind of living room for the city, an open forum, a place of public meeting or performance," he says. "One doesn't have to program a successful square. A successful square has a life of its own. It's a part of the community — not a private affair, not one individual corporation owns it. It's owned by the people of the city, free and open to everyone."

Kesey Square, a brick plaza smack in the middle of downtown, occupies an area of Eugene that's witnessed an explosion of business and a growing sense of activity in the past few years. Despite this, the square has remained mostly static, known best for its handful of food carts, lack of seating and reputation for trouble.

Some call the square a hotspot of negative behavior, steering clear of it while walking downtown, and others call it their living room. Architects, city councilors, artists and activists all have different ideas for this space, from minor modifications to plopping a building on top of it.

At the University of Oregon, landscape architecture students are imagining how to transform Kesey Square into a positive, inclusive public space. Those with the power to implement change haven't done much, but students have invented clever solutions to beautify the square, none of which involve covering it up with a building.

After years of inactivity, the time has come to do something about Kesey Square. Young minds and fresh ideas can breathe new life into the heart of Eugene.

Hearts and Squares

What is Kesey Square right now? Everyone has a different answer. Teesha Baldree says for her, it's a refuge.

On a warm Wednesday afternoon in April, Baldree sits next to Ken Kesey's statue on a marble bench. She gazes out on the bricks of Kesey Square — two food carts pushed against the side of a building, a single table and two chairs arranged in the middle of the empty square.

"It's the only safe, secure spot to be, out in the open in front of everybody," she says. "It's like our living room."

Baldree says when she moved to Eugene two years ago after having troubles with her friends and family, Kesey Square was the first place she spent the night. She's currently homeless, she says, but she and her partner are trying to put together the money to rent a place.

Baldree says she's heard rumors that the city of Eugene is trying to get rid of Kesey Square "because of the messes people leave behind." She says at night, things can get messy — she's watched people try to set fire to the flower pots in the square.

But, she says, "everybody knows what Kesey Square is. People from Maine and Florida know where it is. I'd be devastated if Kesey [Square] disappeared."

Kesey Square didn't start out as an open public space at all; in fact, a multi-story building with a drugstore once occupied its grounds. Formally known as Broadway Plaza, the square garnered its Kesey name in 2003, when artist Pete Helzer, a friend of the Kesey family, sculpted a bronze statue depicting author and Eugene icon Ken Kesey reading to his grandchildren.

A 2003 *Oregon Art Beat* episode shows the unveiling of the statue, with a crowded square and Kesey's daughter, Sunshine, saying, "This is like having my living room in the middle of town. This is a special, special treat that makes my family much bigger."

A Model Eugene

On an average spring afternoon, Kesey Square is quiet — young people sit next to Ken Kesey's bronze statue, and a few food carts line one wall, while more people sit propped up against the other wall, their bags, dogs and bikes often scattered around them.

Come back later in the evening, during a First Friday ArtWalk or other city-planned event, and the square is bustling with activity and noise as people stream from one art site to the next.

And perhaps later that night, a rowdy mix of college students, bar hoppers and the unhoused intermingle with police officers roaming the streets of Broadway and Willamette.

The "layers of the day" is a concept that city of Eugene Public Art Manager Isaac Marquez encourages UO architecture students to think about when reimagining the square. At the students' midterm in the UO architecture building, Marquez gives feedback: "Lighting, lighting, lighting," he says. "It's the key to public safety."

Across the room, colorful architectural drawings and presentation boards reveal crisp lines and bright images of hypothetical Kesey Squares.

"I like to think of this as more of a model for what Eugene can be," says Peter Obermeyer, an undergraduate in landscape architecture. His drawings show an open, people-filled pavilion with archways nestled into the background buildings and a waterfall tucked into the corner of the square. A rooftop terrace offers views for diners. The look emanates warmth and invitation.

Artist Betsy Wolfston, who designed the "Four Seasons" artwork near Kesey Square, gazes thoughtfully at the drawings. It's her job to give Obermeyer feedback and advice on his midterm project.

"Twenty years ago, the city had the criteria not to put art along the building walls because they wanted to punch them out," she says. "It's funny to see things come full circle."

Wolfston brings up ideas people have knocked around over the years — putting a building back in the square, for one — and Obermeyer nods.

"Part of the purpose of this studio is to prove that we shouldn't have a building there," he says. "It's too valuable a space."

'A successful square has a life of its own.'

— JAMES TICE, UO ARCHITECTURE PROFESSOR

RENDERING OF KESLEY SQUARE BY UO ARCHITECTURE
STUDENT PETER OBERMEYER

