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# CITIZENS COORDINATE FOR CENTURY 3

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## C-3 SPEAKS - MARCH BREAKFAST DIALOGUE

### *Rethinking Horton Plaza & Taking Back the Streets*

Horton Plaza famously spurred the revitalization of downtown San Diego, but like other regional shopping centers, it is facing the pressure of changing times. Its tenant spaces continue to close and remain vacant, and the “fortress-like” design seems out of date with the vibrant street scenes that surround it.

Meanwhile, downtown's population - and demand for retail - continues to grow. These struggles mean new opportunities to redevelop and rethink the landmark structure. As redevelopment happens, how can the building be opened up to the surrounding streets? Can and should housing be added to help San Diego with its housing crisis? And with competing retail in the Gaslamp Quarter and online stores, is a major shopping center needed downtown?

Join us in March as we discuss the many opportunities presented with the redesign of Horton Plaza, and the changing role of community shopping centers.

**Panelists Included:** Gary London, Senior Principal, London Moeder Advisors; Alex Ward, Director of Operations, Gaslamp Quarter Association; Frank Wolden, Principal, AVR P Skyport

**Moderator:** Mike Stepner, FAIA, FAICP  
Acting Chair, Architecture Programs, NewSchool of Architecture & Design

**With Keynote Commentary:** Roger Showley, Staff Writer for Growth and Development, Union Tribune

“The design of Horton Plaza was groundbreaking, a game changer for how shopping centers could be experienced” – Roger Showley

“The goal was to create an interconnected space with the surrounding streets, but the resulting design was as outward as it could be at the time. Ultimately the experience in a box was not the way to do it” – Frank Wolden

Upon construction, Horton Plaza was lauded as groundbreaking, as an example of urban redevelopment and an innovative shopping center design, a unique shopping experience. It quickly became a world-famous destination and helped to propel the success of the Gaslamp Quarter.

Alex Ward with the Gaslamp Quarter Association stated that over the years, Horton Plaza (and its owner, Westfield) were a great friend to Gaslamp Quarter, but the Gaslamp Quarter can no longer

rely on Horton Plaza to be the retail draw to the area. It is forging ahead creating its own retail experience with tourists in mind.

Unfortunately, Horton Plaza has outlived this heyday. The past five or more years have been a period of decline and neglect. As Showley asserts “if Westfield had been more bold and entrepreneurial, they would have filled the plaza with other active uses (start-ups, virtual reality, work spaces, etc.)” He only hopes the French owners will bring some of their “French magic” to the center and liven it up as they have done for shopping malls across Europe. There is speculation that the mall has been purposefully let go so as to dispose of the asset for other uses. If Horton Plaza is to come back to life, it will need to revamp the experience. London cites The Pendry Hotel as an example of new retail and hospitality Downtown that is delivering a new and fresh experience.

Gary London assured the group that a deal is in the works with the new operator (a French company) that will bring a much smaller amount of retail, more office, a hotel, and possibly housing to the site. He confirmed there is an inevitable built-in demand for retail in Downtown, due to the increased residential population. The draw will need to be the experience that Horton Plaza offers to visitors.

In summary, the design challenge now is to find a way forward, or as Wolden described it, to “crack open the box and relate it to Gaslamp.” Existing infrastructure should be used to rethink design, integrate more mixed use, surrounded by high density. The Gaslamp Quarter would like to see more vibrant daytime uses such as office space, hotel space, to balance the nighttime population.

The Breakfast Dialogue led the panel and audience to close with a series of provocative questions about the future of Horton Plaza, among these, how to involve local businesses, should Petco Park serve as a model for how to better integrate large retail uses into Downtown, could Horton Plaza be a venue for arts and music, or how does redevelopment of Horton Plaza turn the plaza inside-out and set a new standard for urban development?

C-3 is a committed partner to city and design leaders to find a way to retrofit rather than decimating what has been one of San Diego region’s most prized assets. The last thing anyone wants to see is another hole in the ground for decades to come.