



2016 Winner

Mission Plaza

Submitted by: City of San Luis Obispo

Mission Plaza in downtown San Luis Obispo has a unique and special character that reflects our community's culture and history. According to traditional accounts, on September 1, 1772, Father Junipero Serra hung a bell in a sycamore tree on the bank of San Luis Creek, rang it numerous times to attract the local Chumash people, and proceeded to conduct the founding mass at Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa. This also marked the beginning of the community of San Luis Obispo, with the Mission as its geographical, cultural and recreational center. The area in front of the church, the site of Mission Plaza, was used for public gatherings of various sorts (including bull fights) from its earliest days until about 1860. However, as the community and the street network grew, the land in front of the Mission stopped functioning as an area for large public gatherings; instead, Monterey Street and private land holdings made up the area between the Mission and San Luis Creek. Then, on November 22, 1970, almost 200 years after the founding of the Mission, and 20 years after local citizens began planning for the rebirth of a downtown gathering place, Mission Plaza was dedicated. Today, Mission Plaza is the heart of San Luis Obispo.



Mission Plaza has a visually interesting design with iconic features. The Plaza is bordered on the north by the beautiful white stucco parish, and to the south by San Luis Creek. The Mission still provides church services daily. It also gives public tours and has a museum adjacent to the Plaza. The plaza is a broad tree-

lined expanse thanks to the closing of Monterey Street. It includes a fountain with sculptures that harken to the area's Chumash heritage, an amphitheater, gazebo, restrooms, and a variety of other public art added over the years. San Luis Creek is exposed through this area of downtown, and provides a natural retreat for residents and visitors. There are two pedestrian bridges connecting the Plaza with walkways along the creek and adjacent businesses. In addition, the restored Murray Adobe continues to reside in the Plaza. It is the 19th century home of Walter Murray, the founder of the still-existing newspaper, the San Luis Obispo Tribune. Mission Plaza's proximity to the History Center and the San Luis Obispo Museum of Art provides additional visual interest and defines the area an arts and cultural hub in the community.

Mission Plaza contributes to resident's day-to-day quality of life, providing a public gathering place in the heart of downtown for almost 100 special events and activities throughout the year. Some examples from the long list of events and activities held year-round in Mission Plaza include: The free summer Concerts in the Plaza series showcases local performers every Friday for 10 weeks, and had more than 3,000 attendees last year. Children's Day in the Plaza includes visual and performing artists providing entertainment to more than 2,000 children and families. Pride in the Plaza is an annual LGBT event with 4,000 attendees. A Day with Creative Women is an event geared specifically to women artists and artisans, with over 25 artists participating, and 3,000 visitors. The plaza itself provides the canvas for the annual street chalk painting festival, I Madonnari. Brews and Bites and Taste of San Luis Obispo are both popular culinary festivals held in the Plaza. And over 1,000 people per day visit Mission Plaza each December when it is home to Santa's House, the Holiday Tree, Menorah, and the Classic Carousel, during Holiday in the Plaza.



Mission Plaza is also an extraordinary open space that preserves and connects us to our natural environment in the midst of a vibrant downtown. San Luis Creek runs along the southern edge of Mission Plaza, with walkways alongside it and two pedestrian bridges across it, connecting residents and visitors to nature as well as the built environment. The creekwalk extends about 1/3 of a mile, from Chorro to Broad Street. It is a fine place for a quiet walk in the midst of downtown. Large shade trees line the creek and the plaza. Large boulders invite children to play along the water's edge. Interpretive signs tell the

story of the native steelhead trout, their migration and life cycle. San Luis Creek is considered critical habitat for steelhead. Creek restoration and public education are ongoing, and having this vital habitat included as part of Mission Plaza in the heart of downtown has helped the community understand, appreciate, and actively support its restoration.



Mission Plaza is a safe environment that is welcoming for all, as any great place should be. Not only is the Plaza heavily programmed, but it is busy and active with informal use by children and adults, locals and visitors, all year long: playing in the fountain, relaxing on benches, walking along the creek, pushing babies in strollers, sitting with friends on the grass, or enjoying the patio at one of the restaurants overlooking the creek. Police on bicycles regularly patrol through Mission Plaza on their downtown rounds, helping create a sense of security. It is clean, green, and well cared for by park maintenance staff. Most importantly, as former Mayor Kenneth E. Schwartz, known by many as the father of Mission Plaza, said in a January 1977 speech, "...the Plaza is a people place and that's what cities are all about—people." We couldn't agree more.