



Shelbyville Downtown Square

Shelbyville, IN

Landscape Forms Elements:

Tumbler Area & Catenary Lights

Design Partners:

RATIO Design

Team Members:

City of Shelbyville, Genesis Property Development, Beaty Construction, Butler Fairman & Seufert Inc., ESL Spectrum

The population of Shelbyville was dwindling, an issue city leaders addressed in their master plan to reinvigorate the city, spur economic development, and bring new residents to the city 30 minutes outside of Indianapolis, while at the same time, celebrating the city's past. The City engaged Indianapolis-based RATIO to implement part of the master plan and create a public square and streetscape in the center of downtown. As RATIO Principal and Director of Design Tom Gallagher says,

“Bringing new life to the community and honoring the city’s history became our mantra.”

Many county seats throughout Indiana have public squares, which is the case with Shelbyville. Originally created in 1823, the walkable public square began to lose its luster when the courthouse burned down and wasn't rebuilt. Over time, and with an increase in car traffic, the public square became a parking lot with only the small center fountain of the original square remaining. Opened in 2022, RATIO's design demonstrates the balance of old and new. The fountain, a celebrated icon of the city and symbol on the city's flag, is again taking center stage. The original bowl and stem of the fountain along with bronze elements of the fountain head have been restored. But the fountain integrates new materials and technologies that make it easier to maintain and easier to engage.

The public square and streetscape also exemplify Shelbyville's historic tagline: a walkable city. Previously, the square was surrounded by wide streets designed for vehicular traffic. RATIO gave a lot of that space back to the public square. “The streetscape and square are changing the mindset for a lot of folks, moving it from a car-oriented to people-oriented downtown. And the square is affecting the people and downtown businesses positively. We're seeing economic revitalization happening.”

Public squares historically serve as the city center and place where community comes together, and RATIO's design gives people the opportunity to do that as well as celebrate events both large and small. The square is broken into four quadrants, each with its own personality based on its location and what surrounds it. All have lawn spaces; two have pavilions for flexible use. “The quadrant grid and different amenities make the square a flexible space that can be transformed for events, from closing off one quad or half or opening up the entire square,” says Gallagher. “We also considered how traffic moves through the square during events to retain its pedestrian-friendly design. The space can come together as one but still move traffic around the square.”

Many of the vacant stores adjacent to the square are being converted; restaurants, breweries and even a butcher shop are bringing new life to the square. RATIO created wider paved zones along existing buildings and storefronts to activate



these areas. “The City is experimenting with how far to let storefronts move into the public space, but both the City and our design team agree that a little blurring is totally fine and adds to the activity,” says Gallagher.

With the influx of people enjoying night activities around the square, RATIO wanted its design to welcome and create a sense of safety. Each of the quads have large planters with shade trees and other greenery along the edges of the curbsless street running through the square. Between the planters are walkways with Tumbler catenary lighting crisscrossing above them. “We carefully crafted the lighting to be soft but provide safety, and the catenaries gives a nice downward light to these spaces,” says Gallagher. In fact, the planter areas are a favorite of Gallagher’s.

“These spaces are designed to feel like rooms. Sitting on the edges of the planters below the trees with overhead light coming through the trees is comfortable and intimate. And that feeling is amplified at night.”

Tumbler area lights illuminate lawns and buildings along the east and west perimeters of the square and through other areas of the square. “Tumbler lights are contemporary and simple with clean lines. They have a warmth and approachability we liked,” says Gallagher. RATIO located poles among the trees so poles disappear and become like another tree trunk. “We wanted lights to be in rhythm with the trees.”

While the square hasn’t even been open for a year, it has been received wholeheartedly by residents and visitors. On Saturdays, the farmers’ market brings crowds and out-the-door lines at the coffeehouse on one of the quads. New activities, venues, and events are attracting a growing population and giving a modernized feel to Shelbyville, while at the same time this public square, with placards sharing the history of the city and a formal fountain at its center, upholds the history of Shelbyville.

