

Roosevelt Plaza Park- Camden, New Jersey

The City of Camden, New Jersey is one of the poorest cities in the United States and has been faced with several challenges over the past few decades. Page 1 6/15/12es.

Downtown Camden was historically the central business district for all of South Jersey: a commercial and civic hub oriented toward a “working” waterfront, and home to a significant residential population. Despite years of disinvestment and decline, the city’s defining characteristics provide a solid base upon which to revitalize the city. These resources include a walkable downtown core, a rich transit infrastructure, excellent access to interstate highways, first class regional entertainment venues along the Delaware River Waterfront, and the strong institutional presence of medical institutions and educational including: Cooper University Hospital, Rutgers University, Rowan University, and Camden County College. The City of Camden and other downtown entities have focused on long-range planning and strategic public investment in land assembly, infrastructure, and public amenities to revive the economic vitality of downtown Camden.

When Camden City Hall was built in 1928, Roosevelt Plaza served as the doorstep to this impressive new building. As a result of the shift in industry and population at the dawn of the automobile age, the Parkade building was constructed on the site in 1955. The Parkade building was a non-descript parking garage that was placed right in the heart of the city. The building became a complete failure as both residents and stores left the downtown area for communities in the suburbs that were building large malls and shopping centers. In 2003, the Parkade was condemned when Legionnaire’s Disease was discovered on the inside of the building. It was shortly thereafter that the City decided that it wanted to demolish the building, but it was not that simple. The lease for the building did not expire until the end of 2004. In total the building stood vacant for two years before anything could be done, becoming a temporary home for the destitute and a center for illicit activity. The demolition of the building was finally completed in 2011, through the support of federal and state grants. It signified the end of a highly visible eyesore in downtown Camden and an old way of doing things in the city. The grand opening of Roosevelt Plaza Park in June 2012 was seen as a major accomplishment for the City of Camden.

The key stakeholders of the success of Roosevelt Plaza Park are the City of Camden, the Camden Redevelopment Agency, Cooper's Ferry Partnership, and the Camden Special Services District. Each of these organizations work toward the economic development of Camden, and Roosevelt Plaza will play a large role in improving the downtown. This plaza will function as the foreground to City Hall and as a vital public space programmed with arts activities and major civic events.

Building parks in low income downtown areas is a growing trend and part of a larger urban strategy to attract vital economic development. When creating a vision for Roosevelt Plaza Park, many examples of public spaces leveraging economic development were studied. One such example was Bryant Park in New York City and its creator Dan Biederman. Mr. Biederman believed that public spaces make people feel safer because it is a space in which they have a great sense of control. The creation of a safe public space in Camden is a significant accomplishment and has already generated a positive feeling among downtown residents, employees, and visitors.

A commitment to greening the City of Camden works its way into almost every redevelopment project. Roosevelt Plaza Park is one such example and is a crucial building block for helping to redefine Camden's new urban core. The proximity of the Plaza to various outlets of public transportation is a form of connecting the city to the surrounding region. In the same manner, the space has brought together the institutions and businesses that make downtown Camden their home. The re-creation of Roosevelt Plaza Park back into its original form will help leverage significant economic redevelopment and private investment into one of the most depressed urban centers in the United States.