

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO

ENVPL501-26A

Planning in Aotearoa New Zealand

Assignment 1

Reactivating Garden Place

An Urban Design Analysis and Vision for Hamilton's Civic Heart

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Method and Scope	3
3. Garden Place and Its Context	4
4. Purpose and Identity	6
5. Urban Design Analysis: The Seven Cs	8
6. Key Findings	15
7. Vision and Recommendations	15
8. Conclusion	16
References	17
Appendix A: Concept Plan	18

1. Introduction

Public spaces shape how people experience and identify with a city. They provide places for movement, meeting, recreation, public events and informal social interaction. Their success, however, depends on more than their formal designation as public space. A square may be publicly accessible but still feel disconnected, uncomfortable or uninviting in everyday use.

Garden Place is the main civic square in central Kirikiriroa Hamilton. It combines a large paved plaza, a fountain, a lawn, mature trees, stepped landscape areas and pedestrian routes linking surrounding shops, offices, the Central Library and nearby streets. Hamilton City Council describes it as the hub of the central business district and a location for meeting, events, demonstrations, holiday programmes and busking (Hamilton City Council 2026a). Despite this important role, questions remain about how successfully the present layout supports regular occupation and expresses the identity of Hamilton.

This report critically analyses Garden Place using the Seven Cs of the New Zealand Urban Design Protocol: context, character, choice, connections, creativity, custodianship and collaboration (Ministry for the Environment 2005). Selected Te Aranga ideas are also considered where they help address mana whenua identity, cultural narratives and the relationship between people and place. The analysis draws on a site visit, photographs, aerial mapping, council material and a related LEGAL535 research proposal.

The ENVPL501 study connects with a separate LEGAL535 project of mine, examining the historical formation, legal classification and governance of Garden Place. That project considers how legislation, planning instruments, council policies and bylaws influence the management and everyday use of the space. The present report remains focused on urban design, but the governance context matters because public-space quality is shaped both by physical form and by how the place is maintained, programmed and regulated.

The report argues that Garden Place retains genuine civic value, but performs unevenly as an everyday public place. Its openness allows major events and flexible use, while its trees and lawn provide a strong green counterpoint to the built-up central city. At the same time, the fragmented spatial layout, large exposed paved areas, inconsistent active edges, signs of wear and unclear cultural identity reduce the sense of comfort and coherence. The proposed vision therefore retains the event function while making the space more connected, inclusive, culturally grounded and inviting for daily use.

2. Method and Scope

The assessment uses a qualitative site-based approach. Direct observation recorded the physical layout, pedestrian routes, activity, vegetation, seating, signage, maintenance and surrounding uses. Photographs are treated as field evidence, while aerial images help explain the relationship between the plaza, lawn, tree canopy, fountain, buildings and street approaches.

The core study area is the Garden Place civic square itself. The immediate context includes Victoria Street, Worley Place, Caro Street, the Central Library, Centre Place and the surrounding commercial frontages. Some photographs also record wider central-city conditions, particularly cycling facilities and regulatory signage. These are used only where they help explain how people approach and experience Garden Place.

The study is limited by the timing of the observation. A daytime visit in fine weather cannot fully establish how the space performs at night, during winter rain, during major events or for people

with different mobility and sensory needs. The findings should therefore be read as a focused urban design assessment rather than a complete behavioural study.

3. Garden Place and Its Context

3.1 Wider central-city setting

Garden Place occupies a central position within the Hamilton CBD. It lies immediately west of Victoria Street and is connected to Anglesea Street through Worley Place and other pedestrian approaches. The Waikato River is nearby, but the relationship is indirect because Victoria Street and intervening buildings interrupt both views and movement. This is important because the square is geographically close to one of Hamilton's strongest natural and cultural features, yet the river is not strongly present in the experience of the site.

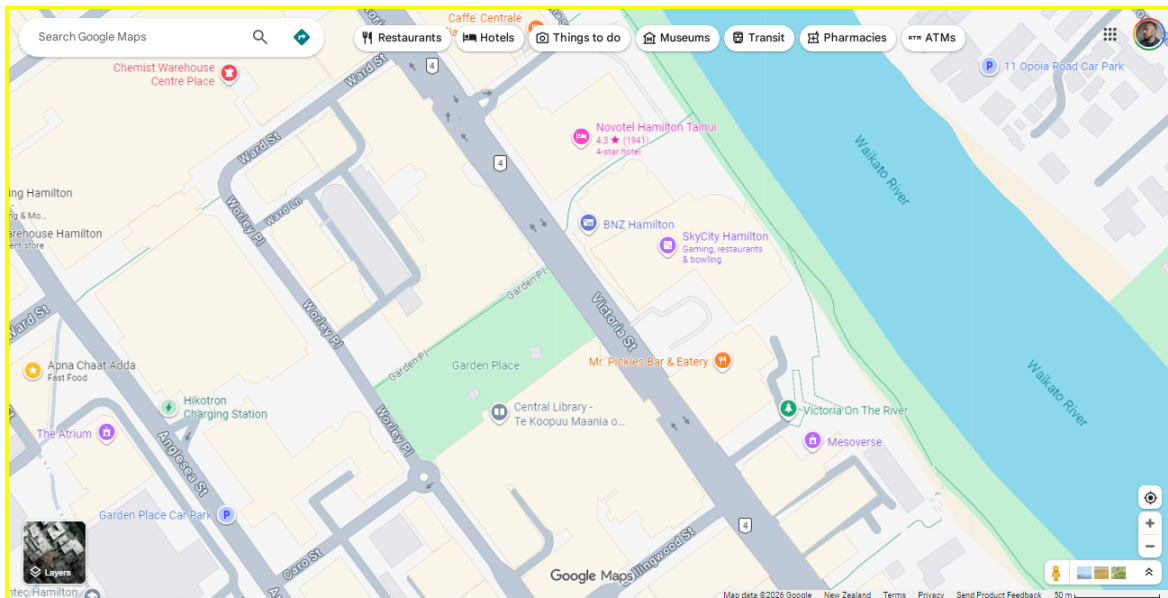


Figure 1. Location of Garden Place within central Kirikiriroa Hamilton. Source: Google Maps 2026.

The square is surrounded by a mix of retail, hospitality, office, institutional and civic uses. The Central Library is a major anchor, while nearby shops and cafes bring regular foot traffic. The building scale varies considerably. Taller office blocks create enclosure on some sides, while lower retail frontages create a more human scale elsewhere. This variation gives Garden Place a recognisable central-city setting, but the quality of the edges is uneven. Some frontages contain doors, windows and active uses, while others function mainly as blank or office-oriented backgrounds.

3.2 Historical formation and governance context

Garden Place is a deliberately constructed civic landscape rather than a leftover open space. The Hamilton Borough Council Empowering Act 1935 gave the Borough Council powers connected with levelling and forming Garden Place and acquiring, improving, selling or leasing adjacent land. The legislation also recognised the increase in surrounding land value expected from the public work (Hamilton Borough Council Empowering Act 1935). This history shows that the relationship between public investment, urban form and surrounding private property has been part of Garden Place from its early formation.

Hamilton City Council notes that the area was historically a hill and garden, later became a car park, and assumed its present public-space role in the early 1970s (Hamilton City Council

2026a). It was redesigned again through the CityHeart project completed in 2012. These changes show that Garden Place has never had a fixed identity.

Current council activity confirms that the performance of the space remains under review. In April 2025, Council agreed to further investigate the social, regulatory, design and safety aspects of Garden Place. Physical work beginning in June 2025 included changing a gravel area into a nature-play garden (Hamilton City Council 2025a; 2025b). These initiatives are relevant to the assignment because the proposed concept should respond to an evolving site rather than assume that nothing is already happening.



Figure 2. Council signage communicating current changes to Garden Place. Photograph by author, 2026.

3.3 Existing spatial structure

The aerial view shows that Garden Place is not one undivided square. It contains two dominant landscapes. The first is an open, hard-surfaced civic plaza organised by diagonal paving lines and centred on the fountain. The second is a greener and more elevated area containing lawn, steps

and a substantial mature tree canopy. Smaller planting beds, shelters, seating and installations are distributed around the edges.

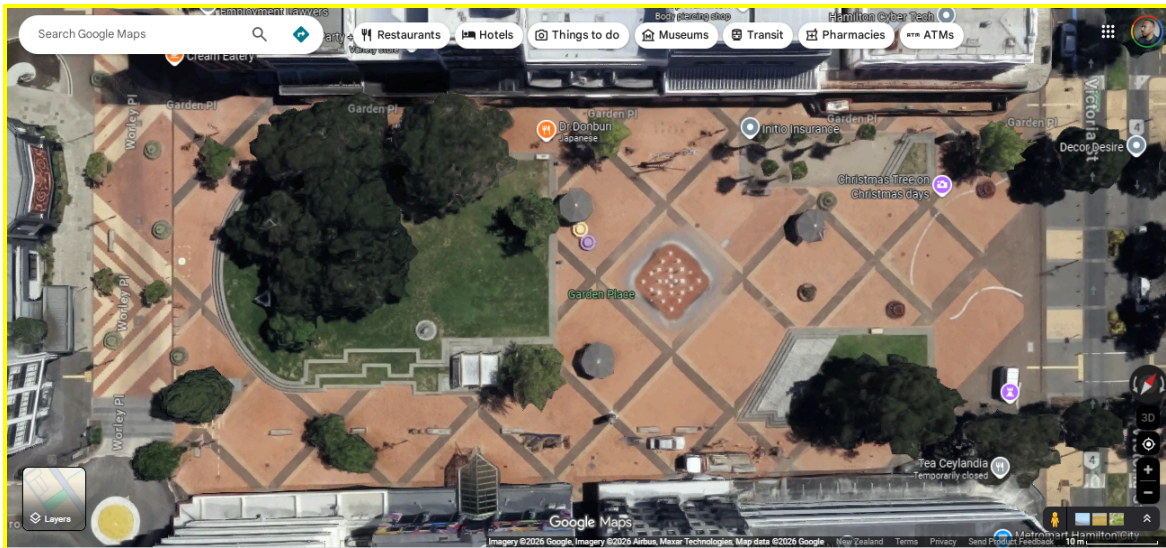


Figure 3. Existing spatial structure of Garden Place. Source: Google Maps imagery, accessed 2026.

The contrast between the open plaza and the shaded lawn gives users a choice of environments, but the transition between them is abrupt. The paved area offers flexibility for events but can appear oversized when no event is taking place. The lawn and trees provide relief, shade and identity, although their raised edges and dense canopy can make this part feel separate from the central plaza. The design challenge is therefore not to fill every open area. It is to create smaller and more comfortable everyday settings while preserving a clear flexible zone for large gatherings.

4. Purpose and Identity

Garden Place performs several functions at once. It is a pedestrian route through the CBD, an address for the Central Library and surrounding businesses, a place to sit or meet, an informal recreation space and a venue for large civic events. Council material indicates a capacity of up to 4,000 people, confirming that event use is a significant part of its role (Hamilton City Council 2026a). The large paved area is therefore not simply wasted space. It is infrastructure for collective use.

An event space must also work on ordinary days. Photographs show people sitting, using the lawn and moving across the square, while chalk drawings demonstrate informal use by children and families. The fountain, chessboard and temporary activities create further opportunities. Garden Place is therefore not completely empty, but its activity points do not always combine into a coherent and consistently occupied public realm.



Figure 4. Informal chalk drawings showing user appropriation of the plaza. Photograph by author, 2026.

Its civic identity is also unclear. The mature trees and central location are memorable, and the name Garden Place suggests a green civic setting. However, the extensive brick paving and collection of unrelated objects compete for attention. There is limited visible interpretation of mana whenua histories, the earlier landform, the 1935 levelling works or the site's repeated

redesigns. Garden Place is recognisable as a central space, but it does not yet communicate a strong shared story of Kirikiriroa.

5. Urban Design Analysis: The Seven Cs

The New Zealand Urban Design Protocol presents the Seven Cs as practical qualities for assessing urban design (Ministry for the Environment 2005). Applying them identifies where Garden Place works well and where design, management and governance need better alignment.

5.1 Context

Garden Place benefits from an exceptionally central location and a mix of nearby destinations. The Central Library, retail uses, cafes and offices provide a potential daily population. Diagonal routes across the plaza also respond to real pedestrian desire lines between surrounding streets and entrances. The weakness is that the square does not fully capitalise on these relationships. The connection to the Waikato River is poorly expressed, some building edges have limited ground-floor activation, and the internal green and paved areas feel more adjacent than integrated.

Hamilton's public-space guidance describes Garden Place as the hub of the central city. The Central City Zone also promotes a people-first centre with pedestrian movement, diverse uses and an attractive setting. Garden Place broadly supports these aims, but its everyday performance depends heavily on programming and nearby business activity. Its design alone does not reliably generate occupation.

5.2 Character

The strongest character elements are the mature trees, lawn, fountain, brick paving and surrounding mix of historic and contemporary buildings. The large trees give the site scale and continuity that newer landscape features cannot easily reproduce. They should be treated as core assets. The Caro House view and other older buildings also contribute a layer of central-city history.



Figure 5. Green landscape, civic features and surrounding built character. Photograph by author, 2026.

At the same time, the square lacks a clear cultural narrative. Te Aranga principles suggest that identity should be grounded in relationships with mana whenua, whakapapa, environmental systems and local narratives, not added as surface decoration. Any cultural interpretation should therefore be developed through genuine co-design with mana whenua. A stronger

identity could connect the Waikato Awa, the former hill, the site's legal transformation and contemporary civic life.

5.3 Choice

Garden Place offers several choices: sun or shade, paved or grassed surfaces, movement or rest, organised events or informal use. Existing umbrellas, benches, steps, lawn edges, play elements and the chessboard broaden the range of possible activities. This is a genuine strength.



Figure 6. Existing creative and recreational infrastructure within Garden Place. Photograph by author, 2026.

The quality of choice is less consistent than the number of elements suggests. Some seating is exposed, weathered or disconnected from activity. There is limited shelter from rain and wind, and not every place to sit offers back support, armrests or easy access. The wide paved areas may be physically accessible, but universal design requires more than a level surface. Comfort, legibility, rest points and sensory clarity are also important.

5.4 Connections

The diagonal paving grid helps direct movement across the square and should be retained as a basic circulation logic. Garden Place is permeable from several directions, and its lack of vehicle traffic gives pedestrians priority within the core. However, the approaches are not equally clear. The river connection is weak, cycling messages in the wider context are inconsistent, and the boundary between through-movement and slower social space is sometimes uncertain.



Figure 7. Cycling and pedestrian messaging in the wider Garden Place context. Photograph by author, 2026.

A better scheme would make desire lines more legible without turning the square into a corridor. Clearer surface treatment, accessible crossings, lighting and wayfinding could strengthen movement to Victoria Street, Anglesea Street and the river. Seating and planting should sit beside these routes rather than obstruct them.

5.5 Creativity

Garden Place already contains creative interventions, including the fountain, chessboard, coloured play elements, chalk activity and temporary programming. This demonstrates an institutional willingness to experiment. The problem is that the interventions can read as separate objects rather than parts of one spatial idea. Creativity should therefore be used to organise experience, not simply add more features.

The most productive creative direction is a layered civic landscape. The central plaza can remain open for major events, while its edges support smaller daily activities. Temporary installations, performances, markets and play can then occur within a clear framework of paths, planting, seating, lighting and cultural interpretation.

5.6 Custodianship

Custodianship concerns long-term care as much as environmental sustainability. Site photographs show established trees and planting that provide shade, urban cooling and habitat

value. They also show worn seating, tired signage and areas where surfaces or street furniture appear poorly maintained. These details affect how safe, respected and welcoming the space feels.



Figure 8. Weathering of public seating as an indicator of maintenance quality. Photograph by author, 2026.

The concept plan should retain mature vegetation, increase climate-responsive planting and use durable materials that can be repaired in parts. Maintenance requirements should be

considered at the design stage. A complicated installation that quickly deteriorates may contribute less to public value than simple, well-maintained seating, lighting and shelter.

5.7 Collaboration

Garden Place is shaped by surrounding businesses, library users, event organisers, buskers, children, young people, disabled users, mana whenua and people experiencing social vulnerability. Collaboration is therefore not only consultation. It also influences whose activities are enabled, tolerated or restricted.



Figure 9. Visible regulation of behaviour in the immediate public-space context. Photograph by author, 2026.

Rules around smoking, cycling and skateboarding show that public-space governance often operates through prohibition. Some restrictions are necessary, but an inclusive civic space

should also provide positive alternatives, such as clear slow-speed cycling routes and active recreation for young people. Current council investigation into social, regulatory, design and safety issues creates an opportunity for this broader approach.

6. Key Findings

Garden Place is not a failed space, but it is an incomplete one. Its main strengths are its central location, event capacity, mature trees, lawn, pedestrian priority and range of existing activity points. Its weaknesses are the lack of a clear shared identity, inconsistent active edges, limited weather protection, uneven seating quality, weak connection to the Waikato River and a collection of interventions that do not yet form a coherent whole.

The analysis also shows that physical design and governance cannot be separated. Maintenance, event programming, trading rules, behavioural restrictions and collaboration with surrounding users influence whether the square feels active and welcoming. A successful vision therefore needs both spatial interventions and an ongoing stewardship model.

7. Vision and Recommendations

7.1 Vision

Garden Place should become a connected civic living room for Kirikiriroa: a place that supports large public events while also providing comfortable, culturally grounded and adaptable spaces for ordinary daily life.

7.2 Spatial recommendations

Retain the civic clearing.

Keep a substantial central paved area around the fountain for markets, performances, demonstrations and seasonal events. Avoid filling the entire square with permanent objects.

Create a comfortable civic edge.

Develop a continuous zone of movable and fixed seating, shade, rain shelter, drinking water and small tables along the transition between the lawn and plaza. This would support daily occupation without blocking event use.

Strengthen the green structure.

Retain the mature trees and lawn, repair worn grass areas and introduce climate-resilient native planting. Improve visibility beneath trees through careful pruning, lighting and low planting rather than removing the canopy.

Clarify movement routes.

Use accessible surface treatment and lighting to reinforce existing diagonal desire lines. Provide clear wayfinding to Victoria Street, Anglesea Street, the Central Library and the Waikato River.

Activate the edges.

Encourage outdoor dining, temporary kiosks, library spill-out activities, small performances and transparent ground-floor frontages. The aim is to create reasons to remain at the edges while keeping the centre flexible.

Build identity through co-design.

Develop interpretation of mana whenua relationships, the Waikato Awa, the former hill, the 1935 levelling works and later redesigns. This should be undertaken with mana whenua and local communities, not added as a decorative theme.

Design for varied bodies and ages. Provide seating with backs and armrests, wheelchair companion spaces, smooth accessible routes, tactile and visual contrast, child-friendly play and calm places away from the busiest routes.

Use adaptable infrastructure. Provide discreet power, water and event connection points, movable furniture and modular elements that can support markets, performances, classes, play and everyday lunch use.

7.3 Management and activation recommendations

- Prepare an integrated Garden Place stewardship plan linking design, maintenance, events, trading, safety and social support rather than addressing each issue separately.
- Establish a regular but not overcrowded programme of low-cost activity, including library events, food or craft markets, music, community workshops and children's play.
- Review permit and trading processes so small-scale activation is easy to organise while existing businesses are treated fairly.
- Use post-occupancy evaluation. Record who uses the space, when they use it and which areas remain empty across seasons, evenings and event days.
- Create a standing collaboration group including mana whenua, access representatives, young people, surrounding businesses, library staff, event users and social-service organisations.
- Treat maintenance as visible civic care. Set clear service standards for seating, planting, lighting, signs, cleaning and repairs.

7.4 Relationship to the concept plan

The concept plan should visually distinguish three connected zones: a flexible civic plaza, a shaded green room under the mature trees, and an active transition edge between them. Existing diagonal routes should remain clear. New seating, shelter, planting and activity points should be concentrated at edges so that the central event area is not compromised.

The full-size concept plan is provided in Appendix A (Figure A1).

The final concept plan should show retained elements, proposed changes and the relationship between each proposal and the Seven Cs.

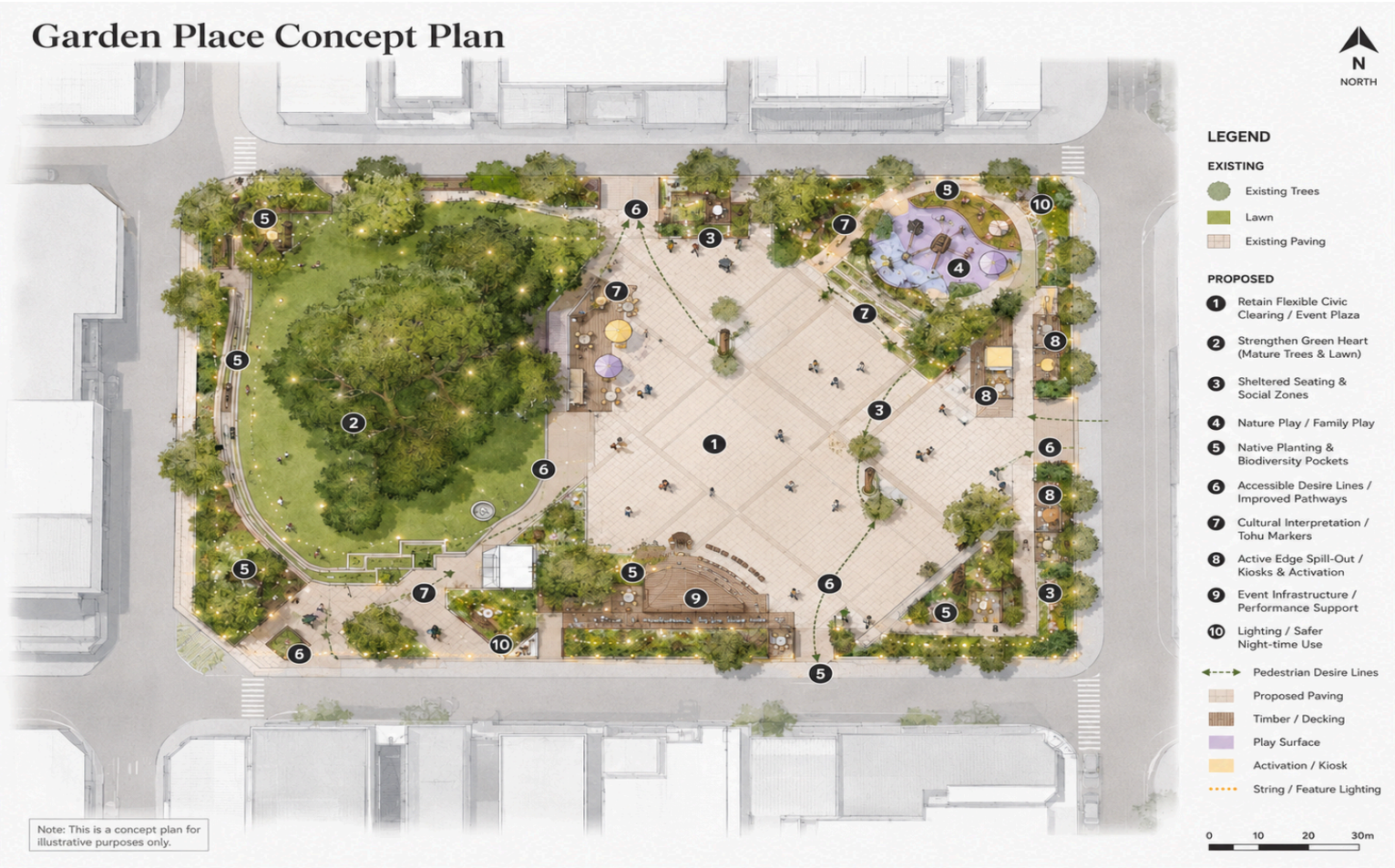
8. Conclusion

Garden Place remains one of Hamilton's most important civic spaces. It has strong assets that should not be lost: a central location, mature trees, a large event surface, pedestrian access and several existing forms of activity. The main issue is not the absence of features. It is the weak relationship between them and the uneven quality of the everyday experience.

The proposed vision responds by keeping the civic clearing while building a more comfortable and active public realm around it. It links physical design with long-term stewardship, cultural identity and collaboration. This approach would allow Garden Place to function both as Hamilton's formal civic stage and as an ordinary place where people choose to spend time.

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Appendix Figure A1. Illustrative Garden Place concept plan. Concept and recommendations by the author; digital illustration prepared with AI assistance, 2026.