



# MEGJC Thought Leadership

## Reimagining the Gateway to Kingston: Why City Entrances Matter

Written by: Lajoy Edghill,

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The entrance to a city offers more than just access—it sets the tone for experience. Like the cover of a book or the overture to a symphony, city gateways are the starting point of perception, and can shape lasting impressions of place, culture, and potential. For Kingston, Jamaica's capital and commercial heart, this concept takes on heightened significance.

Despite our country's global influence, renowned for reggae, athletics, and natural beauty, the entrances to our cities often fail to reflect our dynamism. This is especially true for Kingston, a city rich in cultural, creative, and historical significance. Today, the arrival route from the Norman Manley International Airport and the Port Royal Cruise Port leaves much to be desired.

This article makes the case for revitalizing Kingston's primary city gateway—transforming it into a vibrant, welcoming corridor that reflects our identity and invites investment, civic pride, and cultural celebration. Drawing from global case studies and urban design research, we explore how the transformation of city entrances has catalyzed urban renewal elsewhere, and why Kingston is poised for the same.

### The Power of the First Impression

A city's entrance provides a literal and metaphorical window for perception of the city's identity. Cities are complex, living organisms that evolve to meet social, economic, cultural, environmental and technological needs. Yet even in their complexity, cities have identities—distinct characteristics shaped by people, place, and history.

Kevin Lynch defines identity as “the distinguishing character of a person or thing,” or more specifically, “the extent to which a person can recognize or recall a place as being distinct from other places” (Lynch, 1981). For Kingston, our distinctiveness is unquestionable. But is it immediately visible to someone just arriving?

The existing approach from the airport to the city core is both underwhelming and unreflective of our global cultural capital. This gateway instead ranges from bland to deteriorated in aesthetics and functionality, and does not paint a justifiable first impression of our nation's capital. This mismatch between perception and reality presents both a challenge and an opportunity.

### From Fortified Gates to Green Corridors

Historically, city gates were literal defensive structures—physical barriers that marked controlled entry and often served economic and symbolic roles. Today, modern city gateways have taken a variety of forms, ranging from simple welcome signs to airports or seaports, shopping venues, commissioned art and sculptures, reinvented natural features, or massive, monumental structures. As Wolfe (2017) notes, these contemporary gateways are centered around “invitation and the prestige of arrival.”

In this view, a city entrance becomes a storyteller. It introduces the identity, history, and aspirations of a place. “A person's first visualization of a city is formed as the perception of its entrance and as such, the entrance should represent the identity and hidden values of the city” (Bagheri et al, 2018).

For Kingston—a city with global musical influence, a storied past of resistance and cultural invention, and a diverse population—our entrance should embody this richness.



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Fard and Rahmani (2019) critique modern city entrances as too often designed solely for traffic, becoming “quick routes” surrounded by “troublesome uses” like industrial activities that “cause visual disorder”. Their recommendations for revitalization include:

- Historic signage and monuments
- Landscaping with local flora
- Culturally aligned businesses (restaurants, artisan markets)
- Public seating, art installations, and interactive features
- Relocating incompatible land uses

These lessons can guide Kingston’s own transformation.

### Lessons from the World

#### Xiamen, China

Nicknamed “Garden on the Sea,” Xiamen has woven its identity into every corridor of its city gateway. The most popular international gateway to the city is via the Xiamen Gaoqi International Airport. From this point of entry, without knowing much about the city, the priorities of Xiamen become evident. Each corridor along the airport is lined with lush endemic plants—showcasing a glimpse of the greening which can be witnessed throughout the city. Additionally, artwork on the walls highlight the colonial architecture within the locality.

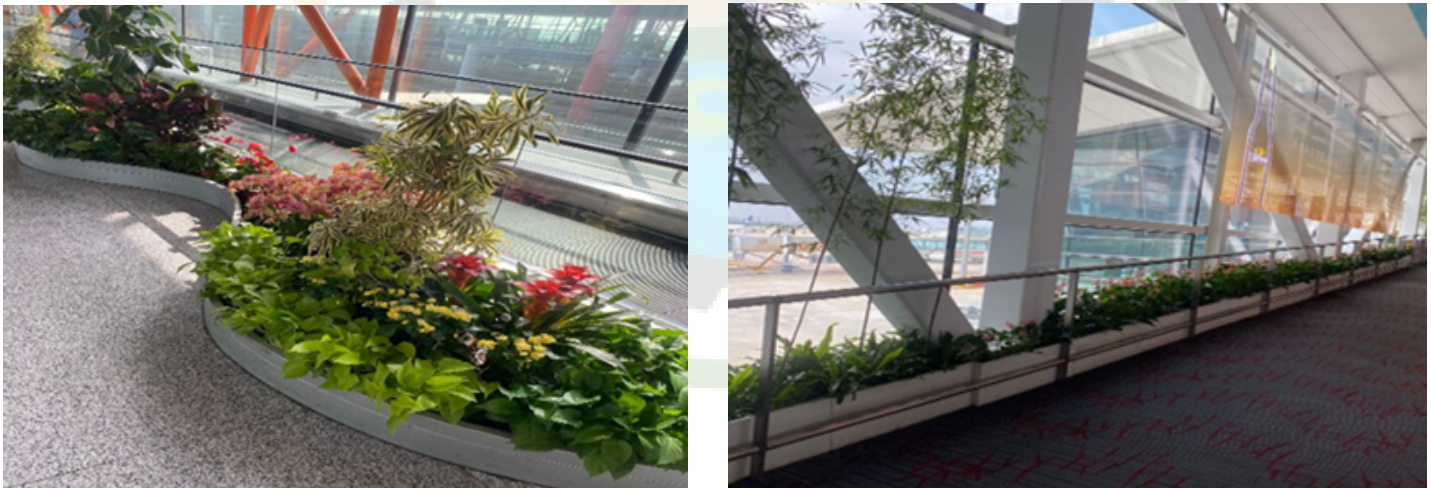


Figure 2-Endemic plants in Xiamen Airport. Source: Edghill, 2023

From the airport, multiple routes may be taken to explore the city of Xiamen. Each corridor, however, manages to capture and radiate different aspects of Xiamen’s culture and history. Green corridors are common throughout Xiamen, as are botanical gardens and thematic parks. Street furniture and ornamental lighting add an interactive layer to city entryways.



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Figure 3-Xiamen city green corridor with signage. Source: Edghill, 2023

Green corridors are common throughout Xiamen, as are botanical gardens and thematic parks. Signage is not only functional but also visually appealing, offering photo opportunities and cultural touchpoints that enhance navigation and memory.



Figure 4-sculptures in thematic park capture the history and architecture of ancient Xiamen. Source: Edghill, 2023



Figure 5-Innovative signage. Source: Edghill, 2023

Each major thoroughfare leading towards the heart of Xiamen city reveals aspects of the city's identity. Some routes reveal murals depicting the affluent aquaculture, while other entryways lead to historical temples. Regardless of the route taken towards the heart of the city, signage is incorporated in innovative ways. Importantly, as an international tourist attraction, signs are displayed in multiple language which enhances navigation. Other signs are solely aesthetic and function also to present photo opportunities. The emphasis placed on showcasing culture and identity in the city continue to contribute to its economic success and popularity and distinguishes it from many other cities in China. Xiamen's approach proves that even a modern, high-tech city can retain its sense of identity and environmental integrity through careful gateway design.



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### Nassau, Bahamas

In Nassau, city identity greets visitors with music, art, and sculptures. At Lynden Pindling International Airport, guests encounter live Bahamian bands and statues of Junkanoo dancers.

Leaving the airport and traversing eastwards towards the cultural city centre of Downtown Nassau, visitors interact with a well-kept corridor of beautiful landscaping, helpful signage and public art that reflects popular Bahamian cultural features. A striking sculpture of a Conch Shell is the first sculpture situated along the corridor. It is strategically located as a brilliant representation of major aspect of the local cuisine. In Nassau, conch is a main feature of the local diet, incorporated in dishes such as conch salads, conch fritters, cracked conch, conch chowder, among others.



Figure 6-Conch Shell statue along major corridor in Nassau.  
Source: Unknown



Figure 7-Cultural mural in Nassau. Source: Edghill, 2019

Several similar sculptures depicting a variety of recognizable Bahamian cultural icons, — such as the Rooster, Lobster, Triton Trumpet Shell, White-Crowned Pigeon, and Flamingo are conspicuously placed along major entryways in Nassau and have become landmarks and symbols of pride for residents (Bahamian Art and Culture, 2018).

Major entryways leading to Bay Street, which is the main commercial district in Downtown Nassau, also offer pockets of culture. Streets are lined with colourful refurbished historic building, inviting street furniture and murals displaying phrases in the local creole. Signage and plaques are used to relay historical information to visitors, and interactive props invite visitors to explore more of the local attractions. The bright vibrant colours used along these corridors also add to the aesthetics and overall appeal.



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Figure 8-Colorful historic street Nassau, Source: Muntzinger, 2021

These combinations of strategies not only allow Nassau to meet visitors' visual expectations, but also present an accurate display of the Bahamian culture. It's a city that tells you where you are from the moment you arrive.

The case studies of Xiamen and Nassau reveal that culture and identity can be made evident along city entryways in vastly different ways. Each city is unique, and the way that identity is displayed relies heavily on local context. In Jamaica, the proposed entryway must be reimagined through a very culturally specific way that also complements our natural environment.

### Reimagining Kingston's Gateway

Our own entry corridor - stretching from the Norman Manley International Airport along the Palisadoes unto Sir Florizel Glaspole Highway - is uniquely poised for transformation.

The Palisadoes spit, bordered by the Caribbean Sea to the south and the Kingston Harbour to the north, offers stunning natural appeal and a wealth of underutilized potential. This space is already frequented by joggers, birdwatchers, and students.



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Enhancements could include:

- Street furniture and infographics
- Interactive photo signage for sunrise/sunset viewing
- Designated parking, shaded seating areas, and landscaping
- A 'Welcome to Jamaica' thematic park, ideal for cruise ship visitors

Beyond the Palisadoes, the Florizel Glasspole Highway offers room for:

- Landscaped medians featuring indigenous plants
- Seaside entertainment venues and local restaurants
- Digital signage promoting cultural events
- Murals and sculptures celebrating Jamaica's heroes and music



Figure 9-Sunset at the Palisadoes, Kingston. Source- Shutterstock

Importantly, all interventions should reflect local sustainable materials, captivating colours, and cultural references. These aren't just beautification efforts—they are placemaking strategies that invite exploration, investment, and civic pride.



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### The Broader Benefits

Why invest in a gateway?

Because first impressions shape narratives. Renewed and appealing entryways have been proven to attract investment opportunities, attract visitors and increase the perception of safety, which overall contributes to the economic growth and development of an area.

For Kingston, a revitalized gateway means:

- **Economic growth** from increased tourism and commerce
- **Stronger cultural identity** displayed with pride
- **Greater civic engagement** through public space use
- **Urban renewal** that goes beyond aesthetics to meaning

Placemaking along this important corridor will assist visitors with navigation and exploration, while also affording residents and local business owners a renewed sense of civic pride.

### Conclusion: The Gateway as Storyteller

The entrance to Kingston should be more than just a road—it should be a ribbon that ties together our history, our culture, and our future. Whether through art, landscape, architecture, or signage, the story of Kingston deserves to be told with clarity and pride.

As Jamaica continues to embrace sustainability, creative economy, and urban revitalization, reimagining our city gateways is a meaningful and achievable step. In doing so, we not only welcome the world—we also remind ourselves of who we are.

Let the entrance to Kingston become a mirror of our aspirations, and a beacon to all who arrive.



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