ARCHITECTURE

by

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June 1973

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE
AT THE
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
FEBRUARY, 1977

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In the last sixteen years the make up of Chicago's Loop has been transformed, particularly along the central north-south corridor between Dearborn Street and Clark Street and known as the Dearborn Street Corridor. Three major building projects each totaling around one-hundred-million dollars lie on alternating square blocks within the Loop's boundary of the elevated trains. Accompanying each of these projects is a square. These squares or plazas form a group that is interrelated, while also providing a pedestrian with a moving architectural experience.

It is my intention in this thesis to relate that experience to the uninformed. This is important because these open spaces and their surrounding buildings are unique in a major American city like Chicago, and to my knowledge have been given only cursory investigations.

Rather than conform to rigid unyielding arguments an attempt has been made to combine this however necessary format with a looser format, that of the narrative, which incorporates such intangibles such as feeling and emotion. This experience is mine and my friend's experience. Minnie is her name, and what better way to examine the squares and the architecture of Dearborn Street than by taking a walk with us?

Edward B. Allen
Professor of Architecture
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to my brother Stephan
The site was unpromising. The river ran sluggishly across the flat plain to the lake. A low ridge eight miles inland cut the connection between Lake Michigan and the water route that ran westward to the Mississippi. No promontory, no hill caught the eye. The lake alone was arresting. By turns of blue and tranquil, then green-gray and angry, it provided a stunning gateway to an indifferent landscape.
She points out -- right there in front of my face -- the Calder, a big orange mass of dominant and subordinate curves, reaching a height of fifty-four feet. A little thing, it seems, brightly articulating the center of a group of complementary buildings.

"Well, let's go. We've seen enough up here," I say as we walk along the gallery of the Sears Tower observation deck. The brightness of the day wanders about the space catching details, the blue in a gentleman's seersucker suit, the gleaming face of a child thoroughly delighted in his position close to fourteen-hundred feet above downtown Chicago. Down the tubes and to the street, Quincy Street, we head east for the Calder, whose form has settled in the middle of the street, splendidly containing the corridor of office blocks along which we walk.

"Minnie!" I could not get over it. "Minnie, will you look at that? Great, huh?"

She smiles more or less happy about setting her feet down a new path, relaxed and warm, the sun beating out another ninety degree day. We stroll up Quincy, pass La Salle, and on to the Calder.
Summer days shine with crowds and cars, music, and the soft of sweaty pavement underfoot. We come up to the plaza that holds the sculpture. Breezes from the surrounding buildings flow by Minnie's green skirt. She sizes up the sculpture. "It's called "Flamingo"," she passes on to me, while she snaps a few pictures. Dearborn Street busily proceeds on to our left, set against the facade of the Dirksen Courthouse of Federal Center, completed in 1964.

The courthouse remained the only structure to be realized from the plan which called for a forty-five story office building and a large one-story post office pavilion, until 1971 when construction resumed on the site. Mies van der Rohe was the chief architect for the project. The firms associated with the one-hundred-million dollar project were A. Epstein and Sons, C. F. Murphy Associates, and Garden and Erikson. Mies was commissioned in the late fifties by the General Services Administration of the federal government to design expanded facilities for the many courts and offices that constitute this governmental agency. In the process the old Federal Building had to be sacrificed.

The complete structures articulate the order and strength of the facade. The curtain wall that wraps around the two tall buildings is made up of mullions that form an unbroken band up the full height of the facade. These mullions are closely spaced and when juxtaposed against the depth of the spandrel panels, establish a "system of proportions that makes the elevations the most impressive of all Mies's steel-and-glass curtain walls."
Mies's facades are not lively. They brood, like a beautiful woman full of unhappiness. The elevations are dark and somber, from the dark tinted panes of glass to the black painted steel. One feels obligated to maintain a quiet and dignified attitude, a certain distance, and a high degree of respect within this space.

Tension is achieved in Federal Center through the interplay of proportions and placement of the three main buildings. The courthouse which forms the backdrop for the space is placed on the smaller parcel of land to the east of Dearborn. The building runs the entire block and rises an almost equal distance into space to form a nearly perfect square. The office tower on the west side of Dearborn, fifteen-stories taller than the courthouse, is then sited at the corner of Jackson Boulevard at the south end of the square block that constitutes the largest chunk of the total site. The long side of the building faces Jackson Boulevard and terminates in an open space that is the smaller of the two within this complex. The larger plaza is formed by the office tower and Federal Center's last major building, the one-story post office, at the corner of Clark and Adams Streets, which covers just a little less than a third of the square block. The southern facade of Holabird's and Roche's Marquette Building and the courthouse facade complete the edges that define the boundaries of this open space. Hence, the elements in opposition are threefold. The open spaces, the strong vertical bulk of both the courthouse and the office tower, and the great low espanspe of the post office pavilion work at establishing a dynamic rela-
tionship between buildings and buildings, and buildings and site.

The small plaza relates well to the white marble neo-classical facade of the Continental Bank Building which visually dominates this space. The link or corridor that connects this with the larger plaza is complicated by the fact that the service ramp thrusts itself into the corridor and descends to the basement, forcing the pedestrian to go one of either two routes, (1) along the colonnade created by the columns of the office tower before walking back out into the open in the larger space, or (2) by navigating around the service ramp out to the outside edge of the complex in order to reach an aisle that follows alongside that same ramp. (This aisle also serves another function which will be discussed later.)

It is in this larger space that Federal Center finally comes together. The most arresting feature here is that of the fifty-four foot high vermilion painted steel cuvilinear sculpture by Calder. It stands at the center of the whole composition engagingly tying together the two unequal parts of the site, making them one.
The Calder also falls along the major axis of the complex which until now has gone unmentioned. This east-west line, which runs perpendicular to the north-south direction of the Loop's major streets, presents to us the most compelling feature of the complex. The axis is defined at each end by landmarks, Federal Center to the east and Sears Tower to the west. These are linked by Quincy Street, whose narrow passageway is lined by great masses of office blocks and bank buildings all rising to a fairly uniform height of around twenty-five-stories. This passage forms a shaft which runs the length of Quincy Street, firmly establishing the formal relationship between the two projects, while underscoring the special character of the passageway.

The experience along the shaft is a powerful one. The Federal Center and the Sears Tower communicate with a resounding force. They carry on a dialogue that ricochets from every facade on Quincy Street, building from the depths of the street, growing louder as it rises up the canyon-like walls until one's ears ring with the tumultuous conversation that engulfs the space. One is acutely aware of one's surroundings (the Loop), and feels a strong attachment to the city as a whole.

When seen within the surrounding context of the Loop, Federal Center, quite by accident, seems to find precedent in the places royales of eighteenth century France. These squares were built in honor of Louis XV during his reign as king. The notion of the ideal square had evolved from the seventeenth-century concept of a closed square set apart and in no direct relationship with the surrounding streets, to a square "to be interre-
lated as closely as possible with the town as a whole." This is clearly and most demonstrably expressed by the Place de la Concorde in Paris.

One has to remember when comparing the American square with its historical counterpart in Europe that the similarities that do arise are most discernable physically, and then are sometimes wanting. For the most part, social comparisons are tenuous, if they exist at all. Nevertheless, these comparisons help to round out one's understanding of the American square, while also making it clear that these open spaces are far from original in concept and do have a firm foothold in history.

European squares are an integral part of European culture. They have evolved through the centuries, adapting themselves to the changing and ever increasing demands of society. They have purpose. The squares are a meeting place where many Europeans gather to spend large parts of their day.

The medieval market squares typified the importance of the square within the culture. They were the centers of commercial and business activity in many European towns. They functioned much like the crossroads for the society. One could purchase goods for sustaining daily life and also, if one was wealthy enough, the luxuries that their life had to offer. This activity took place in a relatively small space, (in contrast with American linear shopping avenues and suburban megastructure shopping malls), tightly organized at the center of town. All of these squares were accessible on foot, and the market square was oftentimes at the end of one's journey. People therefore spent
lots of time here. There was no rush. One might have lingered all day to renew old acquaintances, to browse, to barter or to be entertained by traveling bands of actors or minstrels. The market square meant life to these people.

The parvis or church squares were carved out of the existing town fabric around important churches. These churches were also an integral part of daily life. The church helped to dictate the lifestyles expected of its people and the community was obliged to participate. As the authority of the church grew throughout the Middle Ages, the open space surrounding the church grew also. While serving as ceremonial space, it also functioned as a gathering place for the community's people. Here, the children would play while adults played grown-up games and gossiped. Again, the space served a vital function in their daily lives. These people had reason to populate these squares. It was here that they could visit with friends and watch life go by.

As the European towns grew into great cities, a more sophisticated relationship between town and people and open space had to be established. The pattern of movement and travel became more complex. Streets had to accommodate more and more traffic. The spaces had to accommodate more and more people. In Rome and Paris, two European cities that house a disproportionate share of the celebrated squares of Europe, city planners like Pope Sixtus V began untangling the mess and clutter of the medieval city in Rome, building new avenues which connected open spaces that had remained isolated pockets within the city's web. Squares were paved and monuments erected at many of their centers to display the ever growing power of the church and indirectly the increasing power of urba-
nism.

In France, the square came of age in the seventeenth-century, closed squares which turn inward, away from the city and the street, to create a place that is somehow safe from the reality of the existing city. These squares were usually commissioned by the royalty or the nobility, that small segment of society that found this kind of defensible space desirable. From the residences that bounded the open space, a nobleman could view his Paris, a city both dignified and civilized, peaceful and beautiful. For example, the Place Vendôme was almost entirely surrounded by a uniform facade four stories high. The two entrances to the Place intersected rather than become an extension of the street. It was easily defendable in this respect and was effectively set apart from the existing fabric of the city. One might have found its counterpart in the open spaces behind the gates of the various colleges of Yale University.

By the eighteenth century in Europe, the prevailing attitudes had begun to shift toward a more open square that made a strong visual link with the rest of the city. The two most celebrated examples of this new attitude were the Place de la Concorde and the Place Royale of Nancy. In terms of organization and pure physical attributes one can find many similarities between these two squares and Mies's Federal Center.

In scale, Place de la Concorde would dwarf its American counterpart. Also, its primary function is quite different. While the Place functions as a grand and sophisticated traffic interchange connecting major streets such as the Champs Élysées with
other quarters of Paris,

the Federal Center’s open space is primarily for viewing Mies’s architecture and the Calder sculpture.

However, these spaces do share in common the notion of open space as a station from which one may establish or reestablish his relationship to and orientation within the city.

The basic element
used to achieve this purpose is the vista, which forms a strong visual link with the principal landmarks that help to define the city as a whole. In corde, these vistas down the Champs Elysées, terminating in the Arc de Triomphe, and the vista down the Rue Royale toward the Madeleine, the main vista Street, terminating, while secondary noting are those Street to Dearborn down Adams Street to the classical facade of the Pace de la Con-
include the one sees, terminating-Triomphe, and ies down Quincy in the Sears to-
At Federal Cen-
is down Quincy down Dearborn Station, and the neo-class-
Art Institute of Chicago at the street's end on Michigan Ave-
new.
In the case of the Place Royale of Nancy, the similarities lie in spatial organization along the main axial thrust of the open space. At nancy, the spaces quite naturally progress from Place Stanislas through a portal and out along the length of Rue Here and Place de la Carriere on into the hemicycle, a sequence which terminates in the facade of the Palais de Justice. This delightful assemblage of squares that expand and contract, rise and fall, and culminate in an artful rhapsody of open space, provides a unique reference to which to relate the movement along the shaft of Federal Center.
NANCY. A: GENERAL PLAN OF THE PLACE ROYALE
From Patte, Monuments érigés en France

B: AERIAL VIEW TOWARD THE PLACE STANISLAS
Photo Editions Greff, Paris
NANCY

A: PLACE STANISLAS
Photo Editions V. Roeder, Nancy

B: RUE HÉRÉ TOWARD THE HEMICYCLE
Photo Editions V. Roeder, Nancy

C: HEMICYCLE OF THE PLACE DE LA CARRIÈRE
Photo Editions V. Roeder, Nancy
One can best experience movement, the aggressive thrust of this shaft, as a pedestrian. A walk along the main axis will most simply demonstrate the similarities between Federal Center and its historical counterparts. And it just so happens that I had used this convenient path to reach Sears Tower for my meeting with Winne.
Arriving downtown by subway at State Street and Jackson Boulevard, I climb from out of the underground, just a few steps away from Quincy Street. From here, I enter a cul-de-sac that terminates in the curtain wall of the Dirksen Courthouse. The anonymous character of the buildings on either side of the cul-de-sac blocks out both ends of the courthouse and leaves its center to rise swiftly upward to meet the rest of the building that floats above the roofs of these smaller structures. The space between the buildings on either side of the street is perceptibly more constricted than, say, along Dearborn or almost all the other streets that crisscross the Loop, and as I arrive but a few steps down this dark and shadowy path, I begin to feel as if I am being swallowed up. However, as I continue to approach the courthouse I become more and more aware of what
lies beyond this seemingly dead end. The glass that surrounds the lobby of this structure is not tinted like those on all the stories above and my gaze quickly passes on to the Calder, which for a time appears to sit inside the lobby. After successfully penetrating this portal I stand at the edge of the central open space in front of the Calder. Looming behind the sculpture, in full view, stands the Sears Tower, the tallest building in the world. "Wow!" I suddenly shout as the great step up in scale hits me squarely in the face. At my back is the three hundred foot high and three hundred foot long black steel and glass wall of the courthouse, while to my immediate left across the street the steel and glass wall of the office tower leaped some five-hundred feet into the air, at the same time pointing toward this monumental building three blocks further west.

After jay-walking across Dearborn Street, I stand at the base of the sculpture. To the left stands the office tower and to the right the post office. The axis continues through between these two structures along the narrow aisle mentioned above. The south facade of the post office defines and enlivens the edge of this aisle. Because of its low profile this is the only element in the whole of the center that relates well to people. The edge is transparent and reflective at the same time. Behind the tinted windows the volume is alive with equipment, people, and shuffling paper. The facades of the other building edges are visible beyond the glass walls. As I pass, I watch my reflection, or the activity taking place inside the post office, or at still other times the activity on the surrounding streets.
Crossing Clark Street, the western boundary of Federal Center proper, I pick up Quincy Street once again, and the narrow shaft that is formed between the buildings on each side of the dark canyon-like street continues on until it terminates at the base of Sears Tower.

I pass La Salle street and then Well Street and under the final portal, the elevated tracks that define the Loop. From here, it is one last block to walk and the experience is simply spectacular.
At eye level, I can see the Franklin Street entrance to the tower. Like any ordinary tower, people pass in and out of its revolving doors expressionless, businesslike, and orderly. But it is keeping one's eyes down to earth that proves difficult. They keep reaching for the clouds, upward, floor after floor in the never-ending facade. The solution seems easy now. I will meet Minnie and we will spend the afternoon downtown. All I have to do is get up to the observation deck on one-hundred-three. I enter the building, board the elevator, and press the button labeled heaven.

This marks the end of the sequence, but it still leaves one unanswered question. For all the comparisons one may draw between Federal Center and the *place royales* of France, Federal Center is wanting of a particular life that is socially integrated into the city's fabric. Federal Center's plazas seem created for the sole purpose of reveling in the beauty of Miesian order. One stands within Federal Center's open spaces, a tiny insignificant speck in the monumentalism of its world. The buildings themselves, like the smaller scale Calder sculpture, are to be viewed like great works of art and dismiss the fact that they are living breathing buildings that have been built for people and their needs within the
urban environment. It is even difficult to wait for a friend in this open space without feeling uncomfortable, and one hopes the friend will not be late. This in part stems from one's ability to take in all the elements of the center easily. They offer very little variety in impression and mood. They are effectively removed from time and space and stand alone and apart as monuments to Mies's search for pure form, and never truly caress the city that contains them.
Energy, the hustle and beat of business, the hum of traffic, the sweat of people in a hurry along a corridor of dark old facades, until we notice that one face shimmers in the sun and heat, glowing a blue-green color like the lake itself, giving off signals that excite sweet starved esthetic tastebuds. Minnie and I look, moving in closer down the street, watching the changes. It becomes the Inland Steel Building of stainless steel and blue-green tinted glass.

This building, completed in 1957, was the first new building to be built in the Loop in twenty years, and it is to the designers' credit, Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, that the materials which were chosen to clad the building are both vivid and highly visible. The Inland Steel Building marked the beginning of a new era on Dearborn that would eventually blossom into the well-ordered showcase of modern architecture that exists today. But in 1957, Dearborn could manage none of its present character. For the most part, the facades along the street were black with the dirt of the city clinging to their many masonry-clad walls. The street stood quietly to the west behind State Street, housing banks, office buildings, small retailers and shopkeepers.
If it served any great function in the scheme of the city, it was as a dividing line, an interface between the tremendous commercial activity that took place on State and Wabash Streets, and the financial hoop-la of La Salle Street, two blocks further west, an unlikely candidate for the site of this colorful building and for the beginnings of the building boom in and around the Loop that would last for the next twenty years. Dearborn Street with its fairly anonymous character accepted this delicate stainless steel tower without much fuss, and continued on.

This marked the turning point in the make-up of the buildings in the Loop. Again, Chicago architecture would continue the tradition it began around the turn of the century of producing decidedly modern structures — bold, innovative, clean, disciplined and beautiful.

Inland Steel was and is all of these. It separates the office space from the service space (i.e. utility core, elevators, and mechanicals), into two completely different structures. The office space, at the time, had the largest clear span in a building of this type, fifty-six feet, achieved through the use of three foot deep girders resting on the load-bearing columns set along the face of
the building's exterior. This served space, as Louis Kahn was to describe it later when he incorporated the idea of served and servant spaces, is covered by a glass curtain wall with a blue-green tint and mullions like those on the facade of Federal Center that run vertically unbroken the full height of the building. The servant space, on the other hand, is a squarish windowless twenty-five story tower clad totally in stainless steel and connected to the nineteen floors of offices and lobby by a short hall.

It was not until much later that this building gained a prominent place along Dearborn Street and within the entire Loop. After the demolition of the old First National Bank across the street from Inland Steel, the resulting open space made way for a plaza. This plaza was responsible for opening up Inland Steel's already light and airy facade to shimmer for the public. This building could now be viewed fully, across the sweep of plaza, its long facade sunlit, dazzling, a welcome anchor for the plaza's eastern edge.

We are at the intersection of Monroe and Dearborn. The plaza of the new First National Bank Building spreads out the width of the entire block, sharing its length with the bank building itself, whose south elevation unites the plaza's varied elements: Inland Steel and One and Two First Center.

The plaza is packed. It is just after the noon concert, wrinkles everywhere: in khaki colored business suits, around the hips of pastel skirts and pants, up the arms of rolled shirt
sleeves, on the water beaded nose of a nun in black summer habit.
People sit or stand, walk, sway, point, gesture, laugh, and eat.
They turn their heads here and there; they idle on the steps.
They parade. They sing of life: lunching, conversing, relaxing,
or journeying at the peak of the afternoon.

It is on a day like this that one appreciates the plaza's existence and the effort that went into realizing the entire project. Work on the headquarters of the First National Bank began in 1965. A collaborative effort by the architectural firms of C. F. Murphy Associates and the Perkins and Will Partnership, the
tower rose to a height of eight-hundred-fifty feet before it was completed in 1969. At the time, second only to the John Hancock Building, also completed in 1969, the tower housed all the bank's tremendous operations. (Because of an antiquated Illinois law, branch banking is prohibited.) The amount of space necessary to accommodate the customers of the city's and state's largest bank led to the then-unique shape of the tower.

The bank required its largest floor areas to be located at street level, where all commercial banking operations take place and the volume of people traffic is heaviest. As the number of people needing the more specialized services of the bank decreases, the need for great expanses of floor area decreases also. Offices were arranged with this ordering system in mind. The tower thus curves inward and upward from its base, until finally as it reaches the rental space it continues up to its full height as a conventional office building, shallow in depth, keeping in mind the desire of these tenants to locate their offices at the edges of the building where there is both view and natural light.

The site is at the exact geometric center of the Loop. Given the significance of this location it is interesting to
note, as Carl W. Condit describes in his book, Chicago, 1930-1970, the amount of demolition that was necessary to prepare this building site. There was the demolition of the old seventeen-story bank building and the two parts of the Morrison Hotel which consisted of a forty-five story tower and lesser office areas, shops, restaurants and bars. Destroying this large, dense section of the center city, Condit continues, must have a damaging effect on life here after banking hours. At any rate, construction at this scale cannot be achieved without permanently damaging the existing core.

However, it is to the bankers' credit that they did understand the implications of their actions. While they could never replace this lost chunk of city, they could, at least, be accountable for what they put in its place. Besides the bank building, the First Center plaza was built. Here, an attempt was made by the plaza to partially restore some of the social activity lost through demolition. The center is not content with just replacing facilities (i.e. There are restaurants and shops included in the new plaza.), but actively
organizes events and activities in which the public can participate and is urged to do so.

Probably the most appealing and successful events are the noontime concerts. From eleven-thirty until two the plaza fills with music — jazz, ragtime, classical, and popular. People stop on their way to and from lunch to listen and socialize. Lots of them just brown-bag it and linger their entire lunch hour or they take a break from their business or their shopping to find some comfort and pleasant company in this highly-charged atmosphere.

People seem to enjoy coming here. The setting is theatrical in nature. Movement appears to be choreographed. Groups and individuals weave in and out of the space, stopping for a time to listen to music, to watch the fountain, to take pictures. They smile a lot more. One can catch the eye of someone and nod in recognition and have that person not scowl, but smile back. People's attitudes are almost parklike, the ambiance is similar to that inside one of Olmstead's more celebrated parks on a Sunday afternoon.
Part of the success of this space is due to its physical make up. The whole of the plaza is separated from the street, first of all by trees that surround the three edges on Clark, Monroe, and Dearborn Streets. Secondly, a low wall wraps around the space on the inside edge of the sidewalk. This wall is broken by three great staircases from which on descends to the two levels of plaza below. On these steps one can also sit possessing a breathtaking view of the performance beyond. From the steps, one first reaches the mezzanine level about four feet below street level. At this level sited very close to the eastern edge of the center, the spacious Dearborn Street edge, sits the seventy-foot-long, ten-foot-high mural/mosaic by Marc Chagall. This monumental artwork, unlike the sculptures by Alexander Calder at Federal Center and by Picasso at Civic Center, does not overpower the space. It is best viewed from close up, in order that one may observe and relish the detail and color beaming proudly from its being.
As one descends the final sixteen feet, or two, fights of stairs, to the floor of the plaza, one feels as if he has left the Loop far, far behind. Down here one can get close to the musicians and their music, or sit near the fountain at the center of this composition on one of the three steps that encircle the fountain's pool.
Having now reached the very bottom of this open space, we must now look up towards Clark Street for the one major flaw in this complex. A single-story banking building is sheathed in glass. It remains covered by blinds, negating the light and transparent quality of the material. And because one cannot see through this building one loses the green-framed separation of plaza from the buildings that form its edges. The eye tends to want to look around this building or above it to another of the plaza's vistas which is less annoying to the eye and mind. This does not destroy the pleasing character of the entire surroundings, but it does leave the space incomplete. The space still wants to come together on its Clark Street edge and remove this jarring element from the total composition.

It is not so important that this plaza succeed at all of its edges. The Clark Street edge is a qualified failure. For ex-
ample Two First Center, the thirty-story annex to the bank, helps to strongly define and dignify this western edge of the complex. Then too, the Dearborn and Monroe Street edges do not suffer at all, and they logically flow into the center to participate in the goings-on.

First Center seems to succeed by not really struggling to relate to its surrounding environment at all. By being different, it generates excitement and assumes for itself an especially warm character.
It does not seem as if there is ever going to be any relief from the heat. From First Center, we move on, crossing Madison Street, passing small retail shops which jam the bottom floors of the majority of buildings in this block. "I've got to sit down for a while," Minnie says, "We haven't gone a block, and I'm dripping wet." I nod, looking up ahead to Civic Center, as good a place as any for sitting a while. It begins to unfold in front of us, slowly at first through the transparent glass lobby of the Chicago-Tokyo Bank at the base of the Brunswick Building, then more and more rapidly until it stands in its entirety. We are now at the corner of Washington and Dearborn Streets. Minnie begins taking pictures, and I find the large squat corner column of the Brunswick Building a great place to lean against, out of the way of the moving people. Minnie, some twenty feet away from me, is blocking a lane of on-coming traffic in an attempt to get a good angle on a picture of the plaza.

"You're gonna kill yourself, woman!" I shout. She looks up and jumps back onto the sidewalk, running over to me full of laughter. "I've got it! Let's go sit down." And we cross the pavement of Washington Street, so soft from the heat, to step up onto the hard, shiny, terra-cotta surface of Civic Center Plaza.

This wide expanse of open space is quiet. Almost all of the few good places to sit are occupied. Most of these spaces are on or near either the Dearborn or Clark Street edges. The space around
the fountain near the Clark Street edge seems inviting and we walk over and sit down.

The history of the center began in 1959, as did the planning for Federal Center. The city of Chicago and Cook County saw the need for new office and courtroom space, C. F. Murphy Associates, the chief architects for the project were commissioned by the city, along with associated architects Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, and Loeb, Bennett, and Schlossman. The initial scheme offered two buildings. Both of them would be placed on one side of a large, multi-level, landscaped plaza ringed with shops on its lower level. This plan was scratched due to difficulties with the financing and because of its high cost. (The completed building, including furnishings, and the demolition of the existing buildings on the site ended up costing eighty-seven million dollars.) In the final scheme the multi-level plaza was reduced to a single flat expanse of plaza and the two separate buildings were reduced to a single tower.

The Chicago Public Building Commission was instrumental in moving the project through the planning phase and into the execution phase. The Commission, which holds its own bonding power, had been established in 1956 to facilitate the development of this type of project.

Construction of the Civic Center was begun in the spring of 1963 and was completed two years later. Because of financial problems the building remained unfurnished until 1966. The acquisition of the Picasso sculpture followed soon after.
A band of Chicagoans led by SOM partner William Hartmann persuaded the artist "to donate the forty-two inch maquette for a monumental statue of a woman's head." The actual construction of the piece was financed through various charitable organizations, and in the summer of 1967 the sculpture had its formal unveiling. Although the sculpture aroused tremendous controversy back then, I do not believe any Chicagoan today could imagine their Civic Center without its little Cor-ten jewel. In effect, public acceptance of this art work started a tradition of public sculpture throughout downtown. A new building on the skyline seemed empty, if at its base there was no work of art. Hence, the Federal and First Centers are similarly enriched by public artworks.

We sit in what is probably the most impressive architectural space in the city. The space impresses because it distinguishes itself from the typical square block in the Loop and distinguishes itself from the other two plazas, First and Federal Centers to the south. This is accomplished in a number of ways: through the use of color, by establishing a new order in which scale is increased beyond that which exists in the typical office blocks of the city, by reducing the number of architectonic elements to what seems a bare minimum, by maintaining an attention to detail of a consistently high caliber, by generously allocating
public space within the building, and by providing, through its simplicity, a rare complement to the diverse buildings around the center's edges.

One is struck by the color that springs from the different elements that make up the center. A variety of sepia tones cover the entire complex to distinguish it from the surrounding city. The columns and spandrel trusses are Cor-ten steel, as is the sculpture in the plaza's foreground. The windows have an amber tint while the plaza's floor is terra-cotta colored terrazzo. These earth tones give the space its rich atmosphere -- strong, stately, and most of all sensual. For all its formality, a pedestrian is seduced by the warm air that rises from the plaza's being to come and touch its surfaces with one's feet, run one's hand up one of the building's columns, or at least test out a bench for comfort.
Like that of Federal Center, the scale of the Civic Center is monumental. But unlike the Federal Center with its complicated interrelationships of streets and buildings, Civic Center stands as a singularly powerful statement, its major elements reduced down to three -- the six-hundred-forty-eight-foot Cor-ten steel and glass tower, its accompanying plaza, and the Picasso sculpture. The resulting assembly is moving.

The center develops logically out of the Loop's gridiron. Chicagoans think in squares, rectangles, and straight lines. The pattern of streets and blocks spreads out west from the lake like a smaller scale version of the fields of the rural landscape of the rest of Illinois. Buildings gather up strength from the flat land to reach for the sky. The transition is immediate and insensitive, expressing the power, force, and energy with which the city itself has risen from nothing in little more than a century and a half to become the nation's second largest city. In Chicago, where almost every building is less than one hundred years old, there has been no time to complicate matters with the intricacies and layers of intermingling forms old and new, twisted streets, and diverse scales. Everything in the city is straightforward and direct.
There are only twelve columns that wrap around the facades in the entire building. It was decided to use a bay size of eighty-seven feet in the long direction and forty-seven feet eight inches in the transverse direction in order to maximize flexibility of spaces within the tower. Five-foot-four-inch Warner trusses connect the bays transversely. To gain an adequate ceiling height (twelve feet), the floor to floor height was increased to eighteen feet. The windows completely fill the void between the load-bearing trusses. Hence, the architectonic elements in the building are simply column truss, glass and mullion. This pattern is repeated up the height of the facade and interrupted only by the louvered mechanical floors on nine and thirty-one clearly articulates the power and purity of the tower's structural solution.

The precedent for this building is found in the Continental Center designed by the same architectural firm, C. F. Murphy Associates. It follows a similar
structural solution to its end that of clearly expressing the structural integrity of the building on its facade. Because the Continental Center is a traditional office building the systems does not have to accommodate any of the specialized functions called for within Civic Center's program. Therefore, the Continental Center is a more-or-less squat version of Civic Center for its spandrel beams are of no great depth. It does not possess the great height of the Civic Center, although it seems to want that terrific height to diminish the effect of the spandrel panels. Continental Center completed in 1962, promises of things to come. One did not have to wait long, for in 1965, the Civic Center brought those promises to life that almost grabbed at
Both inside and out the details of Civic Center maintain the high caliber of its intentions: the brilliant incorporation of the mechanical system within the structure (down to the hiring of acoustical consultants to make sure the noise levels arising from the operation of its enormous bulk of sophisticated systems were tolerable), the band of small windows created at the bottom of the large glass panes and split in two in order to accelerate the easy rhythm of the elevations, and the furnishings which blend into the interiors with their clean lines, not drawing attention to themselves.

One detail I found particularly appealing was that of the floor-to-ceiling doors incorporated in the small courtrooms. I remember watching a particularly boring trial on a cold snowy morning in the city. After a long while the attorney for the defense asked the judge for a private meeting to discuss a matter of procedure. The bailiff rose and gave a push to a panel of the wall behind the bench. Almost magically the panel rotated sending the rush of dampened sound from the hallway behind into the courtroom. The outdoor light filled the hallway and reflected off of the pecan-colored wood of the door panel. (The whole courtroom is paneled in this same wood.) Out walked the judge and lawyers as the panel then closed flush to the wall. The wait created the only suspense in this trial. After five minutes the panel rotated once again and in rushed the sound and the light along with the judge and the lawyers. The panel closed once again and the trial continued.
The floors above the ninth floor mechanical rooms are arranged so as to give a large portion of space over to a public lobby. Here lawyers can hold small meetings with their clients and other lawyers. The press can pace the space waiting for interviews with newsworthy people. Spectators can relax during trial recesses or just sit and behold the spectacular view of the Loop and the rest of the city to the south, east and west, for free. I, for one, was stunned by the generous dimensions of this space. (approximately twenty five feet by one hundred fifteen feet), especially in an age when the cost of new construction is so high to make it almost impossible to include such amenities in any but the most expensive buildings. Also, juxtaposed against the outdoor plaza, these interior spaces all but make up for the severity of the open space outside, although one has to admit the plaza retains its distinctive character even from two hundred feet in the air. It does so by reducing the public amenities outdoors to their minimum.

Nevertheless, there are a few people who prefer this open space over First Center's because of its clarity and sparseness. They would rather sit in the splendor of this architectural monument and watch the busy pedestrians and the wide-eyed sightseers, while at the same time carrying on an intimate and secretive affair with the Picasso sculpture which, from the places provided for sitting, appears like a woman who is eager for love.

The Civic Center Building sustains one's interest by simply articulating the complexity of its diverse functions. The simplicity with which the facade reads from top to bottom does
not negate the internal order, but strengthens it. The facade speaks to the ingenuity and brilliance of the solution achieved by the building's architect and engineers. A drinking glass is a simple enough looking object, clearly designed for the purpose of holding drink within its volume. But a beautiful glass while holding drink, also speaks to the talent of the craftsman who has mastered the complicated process by which it was fashioned. The Civic Center can be imagined to be a piece of fine crystal. It is through its simplicity that it becomes a rare complement to the diverse buildings that compose the edges of the complex. From the neoclassical facade of the City Hall, to the Gothic Revival top of the Chicago Methodist Center, to the gridiron facade of the Brunswick Building, to the turn of the century facades of the buildings on Dearborn Street, to the peculiar fortress-like building that also lies within this block, these buildings complete the place setting and we can only lick our lips in anticipation of a truly delightful feast which is what the experience of Civic Center can ultimately become.
The plaza, two hundred feet by four hundred feet, covers nearly two acres of the site and responds to large civic events. When the circus comes to town, they hold an exhibition in the plaza, complete with flying trapezes. The city's Christmas tree stands in the plaza during the Christmas and New Year holiday season. On occasion royalty comes to town and in good weather the public is entertained by big festive welcoming ceremonies in Civic Center Plaza. These events however are not held with any frequency, leaving the open space unused for most of the year, except by the few who seem to enjoy its emptiness.

It must be understood that plazas develop their character through time. The great open spaces of cities like Rome and Paris took centuries to build and form. It should become apparent that architecturally, Civic Center proclaims its importance to the city in much the same way as its European counterparts. The space has a lasting quality which is rare in buildings and spaces in this country. Even in the plaza's infancy there exists within the center's framework a dynamic, timeless and compelling quality. There appears, at least, the likelihood of the building and its accompanying plaza surviving the ravages of time and changing tastes.

Minnie and I are cooling our heels in the Civic Center's fountain. We both have slipped off our shoes and have plunged our feet into the fountain's pool a single square with three steps underwater to the pool's floor. Camp Fire Girls are out on a field trip, and the uniformed monsters minus their shoes and socks splash around the perimeter of the pool along the steps.
A little bit of water seems to go a long way with these girls. Minnie and I are happy because our feet feel fine and in turn we feel less hot. The Camp Fire Girls on the other hand only need to take their shoes off and cover their ankles in water to make them feel as if they are swimming in Lake Michigan.

We end our walk down Dearborn, passing under the tracks of the elevated, out of the Loop, across the river, through Marina City and over to Michigan Avenue to the John Hancock Building for drinks. Looking back across the city to the Loop and beyond, we sit quietly indulging ourselves in the view, satisfied with our afternoon walk.
Quite generally the meaning of the square as a spatial experience can be grasped only by those who are aware of the phenomenon that the human reaction toward the form and dimensions of shaped and molded space changes continuously. This change happens not only from century to century, from country to country, but even within one period and one nation; and it means more than a mere alteration of "taste." It is not dependent on contemporary abstract doctrines and philosophies, although it is certainly influenced by them. It is elemental. It grows from a specific and characteristic mode of human behavior and attitude, articulated in specific forms by the creative process either of an anonymous collective, as in the Middle Ages, or of an individual artist, as in the Renaissance and during later centuries. In each instance it represents an integrated complex of reason, feeling, and will.5
PEARBORN STREET CORRIDOR

Lake Michigan
Footnotes


BOOKS


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PERIODICALS


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding this thesis has been a very complicated matter. It went through so many changes in the few short months of this term, from film to page. I have been helped in great part by Stephan M. Johnson who provided me with the greatest financial assistance and in small part by the Graham Fund of the Department of Architecture.