

City Hall Plazas: They're Different

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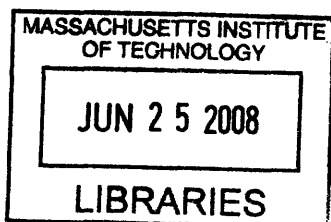
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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the form, goals, and ideals behind city hall plazas by asking the questions: What is the difference between a city hall plaza and any other urban plaza? What are the uses intended by the city in the building of the plaza? and, How are these intentions manifested in the design of the space? The investigation of three cases: Austin City Hall Plaza, Seattle Civic Center, and Boston City Hall Plaza looks to the designs themselves as well as the thoughts of the designers and the reactions in the media to determine the goals behind each city hall plaza and how these goals are reflected in the resulting design.

In each case the goal of creating a "civic heart" is paramount. This goal is defined by a plaza's ability to (1) refer to tradition, (2) relate to the historic piazza, (3) act as an economic catalyst, (4) create connections between disparate neighborhoods, (5) provide open space for everyday activities as well as ceremonial events, (6) symbolize local government and serve as an icon for the city, (7) be a means toward social reflection, (8) be a repository for collective memory, (9) and serve as a sacred space or a space of protest.

In turn, the tools used to attempt to achieve these goals are (1) catering to environmental conditions, (2) the use of hardscape as opposed to softscape, (3) the creation of a forum and the direction of attention, or the focus of the plaza, (4) the size of the plaza, (5) the flexibility inherent in the design, (6) the use of edges (or lack thereof), (7) demonstrating an ethic of care, (8) the use of public-private partnerships for the maintenance and programming of the space, (9) the "grain" or degree of integration of the plaza into its surrounding context, (10) the symbolism attempted through the design, (11) and most importantly, the activation of the plaza.

Finally, the essay ends with a discussion of the efficacy of these tools in achieving the design goals, and attempts to unwrap the deeper meanings behind the goals, and the purpose of the city hall plaza as a phenomena of city form.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

When I began this process, I had the sense that there is something about city hall plazas that distinguishes them from other kinds of urban plazas, but I did not know exactly what the difference is, or why. It seemed that there would be special emphasis placed on the design of a city hall plaza versus other kinds of plazas, and that the design would have special considerations placed on it that are not immediately evident.

I was also interested in the connection between the purpose these places are intended to serve and how the intention is manifested in the design. A city hall plaza can have many uses expected of it – everything from large city-sponsored events down to the everyday uses of a plaza – but how would these demands be accounted for in their design?

To guide my research, I pursued the following questions:

1. What is the difference between a city hall plaza and any other urban plaza?
2. What are the uses intended by the city in the building of the plaza?
3. Finally, how are these intentions manifested in the design of the space? Or rather, what tools (design or otherwise) are used to promote these intentions in the final built form of the plaza?

I did not just want to understand these questions in the context of one plaza, but for the category of city hall plazas, which I consider a sub-category of urban plazas. In order to make any generalizations about city hall plazas I wanted to look at several cases which might show consistencies or differences across them. From these, I could hope to draw some conclusions on the nature of city hall plazas, their intended uses, and how this affects their built form.

Naturally, following on these questions is a desire to measure the efficacy of the designs or arrive at some determination of what the elements of a “good” city hall plaza might be. There is a vast amount of literature that deals with this question for different kinds of urban

plazas (See for example Gehl 1987, 2000, 2006; Whyte 1959, 1969, 1980, 1988; Marcus 1998, Kostof 1987, 1992, 1999; Alexander 1964, 1977, 1979), much of which will be referred to throughout the course of this thesis.

Hypothesis

Based on a preliminary look at various city hall plazas, my initial feeling was that I would find that the size of the plaza would be a major factor in the design, as the scale of a space has a great effect on the feeling it creates, be it large and grand or small and intimate.

I also had the sense that the degree of integration into the grain of the city would be an important part of the plan for the plaza, as would the uses that were programmed to be used there. Would the plaza be a space that was like the areas surrounding it, or would it differ in character?

I also thought that cities might program their plazas in anticipation of high levels of activity such as concerts and other formal events which would make them good for large events, but perhaps not small, informal events or ad hoc uses.

Case Selection

My criteria in selecting the cases was to first look at the amount of information available, and select plazas that had more coverage in the media so as to provide me with a broader source of opinions on the places. I also wanted to select a set of plazas that face different design challenges and cultural contexts which would allow me to feel more confident in identifying the cross-cutting themes among the plazas in distinct contexts. Lastly, I tried to focus on cities of relatively the same size that could be considered "urban" in form and population density.

After beginning my research I realized that there was not much literature on city hall plazas specifically, nor was there much media focused on them (save for event listings such as city meetings, and so on). In order to find cases that would yield sufficient resources for study, I performed an informal content analysis of news media that covered open spaces associated with city halls. Three cases stood out: the city halls of Austin, Seattle, and Boston.

Austin City Hall and its plaza are a relatively new development (completed in 2004), which most likely has something to do with its prevalence in the news media. It has also won several architectural awards, and is located in a downtown development zone that is just beginning to take off. It is featured prominently on the City's website and mentioned often in articles about Austin. The relatively recent nature of the project led me to believe that there would be a fair amount of information on the project that would be easily accessible.

The large amount of press surrounding Seattle Civic Center can probably be explained by the fact that the new Civic Square development is currently in the final stages of its design process. Despite the Civic Square not being built, I felt it would be a good case to explore, as the City Hall has been built with its associated plaza, and yet the City is developing more space across the street for a civic purpose. I found this an interesting point to pursue, and as the topic is current, the conversation surrounding it is also still very fresh and accessible.

Finally, the choice of Boston City Hall Plaza seemed an obvious one when looking at the news media. This comes as no surprise, as Boston's City Hall Plaza has been contentious since it was built. It started as an urban renewal project that displaced hundreds, later to become the site of the infamous Boston busing riots. It has been the subject of many redesign competitions, and the prospect of moving the City Hall to a new location outside the city center has recently been proposed by the Mayor. This example had the most robust information of all of the cases, and provided many interesting facets for exploration.

As mentioned before, there were not many other plazas that stood out in the content analysis. The runners-up were Philadelphia's City Hall Plaza, and Dallas's City Hall Plaza. Both of these would have been interesting cases as well; however I decided that two plazas in New England might yield results too similar, and so decided not to use Philadelphia. Dallas' City Hall Plaza was planned by IM Pei and Associates, as was Boston's City Hall Plaza, so this case was also abandoned for fear of results too similar.

Resources

In my research, I used a combination of primary sources such as plans, interviews, and radio shows, and secondary sources such as newspaper articles and magazine articles, as well as visits to the actual sites themselves.

In order to gauge the public reaction to the plaza and the tensions surrounding the planning and design, it was useful to look to the news media. In two of the cases there were radio shows that specifically addressed issues with the plazas themselves, where callers could voice their opinions. While this is not a representative sample of public opinion, it helped reveal the key contentious points. Newspaper articles served the same purpose in identifying the issues, and providing a sense of the public's reaction.

To answer the question of intention for design, I turned to the original plans for the plazas to draw out the explicit goals stated for the project. I also spoke with the designers of the spaces when possible, or people who had been directly involved in the design process or redesign efforts. I found that the design had often changed quite a bit from the design

outlined in the original master plan, so it was important to speak with the designers and city officials involved in each process about the evolution of the designs.

The interviews with the designers and city officials also helped answer my questions about how design intentions were made manifest in the design of the space. Once the process had moved on from the master planning phase, the designers and city officials were the people most involved in the process, and thus were able to share the thoughts behind how to translate the project's design intentions into built form.

An especially valuable part of my research process was the ability to visit the plazas themselves. By experiencing the plazas in person I was able to see the views from the plaza, sit in the harsh sun, wind, or the cold fog, and get a sense for myself for what the experience sounded, smelled, and felt like.

I spent time on each plaza on two weekdays in one-hour intervals at 8:30am – 9:30am, 12pm – 1pm, 5pm – 6pm, and a visit later in the evening. I also experienced the plaza on the weekends in the late afternoon. During my time spent on the plazas, I took notes on the people who visited and their activities, as well as events or conditions that I observed as a user of the plaza myself. While these cursory observations would not allow me to make any definitive judgment on how effective the plaza may be in achieving its goals, they were still very informative and useful in forming my analyses.

Based on information from interviews or media I also tried to assess which other spaces in each city were important public open spaces. I made a point to visit and document these spaces to the greatest extent possible, as well as spending a lot of time just walking around the cities. This helped me form a limited, but slightly informed, assessment of the city context for these city hall plazas.

Limitations

There was a much larger volume of information available for Boston City Hall Plaza, because it has existed for longer, and also because of the debate that surrounds it. This made it much easier to assemble a picture of the problems associated with the plaza, whereas I had to rely more on anecdotal information to cobble together the stories for the other two plazas. I was able to speak directly to the designers involved in Austin and Seattle's city hall plazas, as well as attend a Symposium on Boston City Hall which involved one of the architects of the building and one of the architects of the plan.

I found that it was very helpful to be able to speak with the designers and city officials face-to-face as I generally gained more information from these interviews than phone interviews. This was true of Seattle in particular where the design was underway, so I was

able to see the evolution of the models and renderings that will become difficult to access once the design phase of the project is complete. It was also fortunate that the designers of the plazas were located in the same cities as the plazas, as they were very helpful in laying out an urban history and context for the project, and some sense of the success of the plaza.

Speaking with people who were so closely involved in the design of the plaza held the risk of hearing biased or defensive responses in favor of the plaza design. This was especially true of the Boston City Hall symposium, as the opinions presented by the speakers may be quite different now, fifty years later. I tried to offset this by speaking with several people involved in the process to help find differing opinions. I also tried to diversify the opinions I received by speaking with people from architecture firms as well as city officials to get a sense of the process from different sides and experiences. By looking to outside sources such as news media, I was also able to get a broader understanding of the process and public opinion.

The biggest constraint on the project was time spent in the plazas and cities themselves. A closer look at each one of these plazas I'm sure would yield an interesting depth of analysis that I was not able to achieve here. Also, a broader look across more city hall plazas would serve to refine and expand on the conclusions I have found from looking at these three cases.

Overview

In this thesis I will begin by looking to sociological and historical thought to try to answer the first question of what differentiates a city hall plaza from other kinds of plazas. The three chapters following the literature review will explore each of the three cases of city hall plazas individually and draw some conclusions about their design, use, and intentions.

Following this, I will try to arrive at some findings about city hall plaza design generally, and attempt to answer the second question of what the intentions of a city hall plaza might be, and the third question of how these intentions are (or are not) manifested in their built form.

At the end, I will pose some further questions that I have discovered as possibilities for future investigation into the phenomenon of city hall plazas.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

In my research I have found little about city hall plazas specifically, but much about public space, plazas generally, and the element which is most essential for their use: public life. As I will outline in the following pages, the nature of public life and public space is cloudy and contested, and poses such difficult questions as: “Is public life alive or dead?” “What is the nature of public space?” and “What is good public space?”

I will not attempt to answer these questions; instead I will frame them within the history of public places, and then discuss their debate with particular emphasis on its relevance to public space. Following this I will deal with the lack of writing specifically on city hall plazas by combining the literature about civic plazas and the literature on city halls and civic buildings to try to draw out some theories about city hall plazas.

I am depending on three concrete cases to bring clarity to this experiment, and will use these concrete examples to show observable cause-effect, or perhaps more appropriately, intent-result of design interventions. The strength and weakness of the case methodology lies in its movement from the specific toward the general. I hope to bring the sociological thought outlined here to bear on an analysis of specific design intentions and interventions to draw some conclusion about city hall plazas more generally.

The benefit of looking to sociology first is that it will set up a theoretical framework for the importance, uses, and problems associated with city hall plazas, rather than looking to design alone, which can be very subjective. Through this I hope to draw some generalizations about city hall plazas, their use, and their associated design.

Public Space in the Pre-Industrial City

“The value of urban open space has always been recognized by society; however the quality, form, and function of urban open space has varied with time and place.”

(Laurie 1989, 48)

In the pre-industrial city private life and public life overlapped to a degree unequalled in any other city form. Citizens lived inside the protective walls of their city, and as population grew, it had to grow within this rigid boundary. Increased density in these cities meant that private space was limited, cramped, and much activity had to take place outside in the communal piazzas (Lofland 1973). Because much activity took place in public, by necessity this contributed to a vibrant public life.

Historically, piazzas were where markets and speeches were held, news sought, and battle plans drawn. Because these places were heavily used by all citizens of society, it is a commonly held belief that historic public piazzas were democratic, heterogenous spaces; however, this is not entirely correct. Piazzas may have been heterogenous, but not democratic in the sense that the diverse user groups that interacted there did not enjoy the same rights and privileges. (Kostof 1992).

Social obligations in ancient times were considerable and participation in public life was required of citizens (Chidister 1989). These spaces were important to a broad cross-section of society, however because of intense class discrimination, piazzas were also places of extreme insecurity (Krieger 1995). While these places played a multiplicity of roles to a much broader user group than plazas do today, public lives in piazzas were not based in the ideals of how a society should live together, but were instead a matter of necessity (Chidister 1989).

A Shift in Public Life and Public Space

The Industrial Revolution caused a major shift in Europe that changed the way that public spaces were used in the post-industrial city. This shift came as a result of the enlargement of cities, made possible by advances in transport which allowed greater dispersion of population across broader landscapes. The shift also resulted from the enclosure of more of the city's outdoor public activities indoors, due to improved construction technology. Evidence of this shift exists in North American cities, however due to their formation in the nineteenth and twentieth century, they are much better examples of the result of the shift, rather than the shift itself (Lofland 1989).

In North America, this shift enabled city forms that extended far beyond the conception of a traditional city center, into sprawling suburbs dependent on the car for mobility. The resulting changes in the form and social structure of cities also had a great impact on the way public life was carried out (Lofland 1973; Brill 1989; Chidister 1989). Because public places are the setting for public life, this change in form also led to a change in the value of public space in central cities, including squares and piazzas.

While scholars generally agree that the form of cities changed as a result of the automobile, there are divergent opinions on the effect this shift had on public life and its commensurate effects on urban plazas. Some argue that public life died as a result of the shift, which accounts for the degeneration of the public plaza (Sennett 1977; Chidister 1988). Others think that public life is alive and well, but has taken a different form which changes the role of the plaza (Brill 1989; Marcus 1998). Still others think that the division between public and private life has been blurred, creating a third category of "parochial" spaces which shift emphasis away from the public plaza (Lofland 1989). Some of these arguments are discussed below.

The Death of Public Life and the Form of the Civic Plaza

Mark Chidister (1989) argues that the difference between the public spaces of pre-industrial cities and now is that the decision to go to a public place and to engage the public world is now a matter of choice, not need or obligation as it once was. He argues that technology and spatial separation create a world where we can sit at home and connect to the world through "the windows of our televisions and the printed media," (Chidister 1989, 35) and that we actually prefer this to the public life of the plaza.

He does not lament the loss of public life as it was in historic centers, but thinks that the death of public life is actually a reflection of our true desires for social segregation. "The car and the highway have often been blamed for the breaking apart of the city center. Rather than being the cause, they simply allowed deep-set divisions that already existed fuller spatial expression" (Chidister 1989, 35). He turns the determinism of form on its head, to indicate social desire as the true reason for the purported death of public life.

Chidister connects the decline in public life to the diminished role of the city center plaza through what he believes is a greater sense of privacy in the modern city. He sites the work of sociologist Barrington Moore Jr. on privacy in society, whose studies show that the need for privacy is based on socially approved withdrawal from painful social obligation. Chidister argues that our system of dependency has become much broader than it was in

historic cities – we are protected on a national scale and trade goods on a global scale – and as a result no longer feel the local ties of this painful social obligation. Without these ties, we are allowed to have privacy in a way that we never could have had in ancient or medieval times, which reduces our connection to public life in the historic sense, and thus the importance of the public plaza.

Furthermore, due to the nature of our society as a spatially separated one, he finds plazas to be limited in their ability to serve a broad population;

“The role of plazas is intertwined with the role of the city center. Because the city center is no longer the focus, plazas can no longer be the heterogeneous, central places of history. They are specialized places serving the limited population of those who live downtown and those who work downtown.” (Chidister 1989, 35)

Consequently, a narrower section of the population is represented in downtown open space, creating a more homogenous, thus diluted and inauthentic experience of public life.

Public Life: Alive and Well

While theorists like Chidister posit the death of the public plaza, others point to the success of well designed spaces as an argument for the potential of public life to thrive in today’s cities. Much thinking about the possibilities of a more exuberant public life emerged in the 1970’s as a way to respond to the disinvestment that characterized US downtowns at that time (See for example: Kayden 1978; Gehl 1987; Whyte 1989).

Danish architect, Jan Gehl, in his paper “Changing Street Life in a Changing Society,” (1989) shares several studies of spaces in Copenhagen that were formerly desolate, but through urban design improvements to the pedestrian experience became vibrant destinations. In his words; “All experience to date with regard to human activities in cities and in proximity to residences seems to indicate that where a better physical framework is created, outdoor activities tend to grow in number, duration, and scope” (Gehl 1987, 39).

The most compelling element of this argument is that, like many of the cities in North America, public life in Copenhagen had been declared dead, and the cold climate was mostly blamed for this. The skeptics argued that “the Danes are not Italians,” but the question in response was, “could Americans be ‘Italians’? Is our Euro-nostalgia misplaced, or could we, like the Danes, be tempted into the streets, given the right settings and locations?” (Marcus 1989, 5).

Another prominent supporter of the argument for an active public life is William H. Whyte, best known for his filming and photography of public spaces in New York City. By documenting behavior in the many different varieties of plazas and parks in New York, he was able to demonstrate that there were strong correlations between better urban design and improved use of public space. His research has led to a much greater understanding of how to design public spaces that people will enjoy using.

Christopher Alexander has also contributed design guidelines to the literature on the design of public space with his book "A Pattern Language" (1977). His premise with this book was to create a universal language for patterns of design that can be used to create better places. While his patterns seem to apply more to European cities, they create an interesting framework for evaluating the design of spaces, and his rules regarding public space encourage thought about the uses and users of the space as the basis for design, rather than design for design's sake.

Not Dead; Different

More recent theories conjecture that public life is not dead, but has transformed into something different than was possible in the pre-industrial city.

Michael Brill avers that public life takes on different forms than it has in the past, which are not recognized because they are oriented much more toward recreation and the private realm. He writes:

"Public life has had a 300-year transformation, seen by most social critics as a 'decline,' or worse, a 'fall.' I don't really agree. Rather, I believe we tend not to recognize some of the public life we do have or many emerging forms of public life. Nor do we honor those forms we do recognize, because they are not for purposes that we esteem or not for everybody." (Brill 1989, 24)

Brill also makes an important step in separating the idea of public life from public open space. He claims that a common historic assumption that public life occurs in open space is no longer true, and to continue to think of the two in parallel is to limit the possibilities for both. By untying public life from public space, and recognizing that much of our public life now occurs online and through other mediums, Brill negates claims like those of Chidister who think that the media stands in place of public life. He points out that media plays a much stronger role in social learning than it has in the past and plazas a diminished one. Instead, these forms of communication support a public life, but one that has moved indoors to the private domain.

Lyn H. Lofland views the debate about the life or death of public life as one that is primarily a moral one, framed by those who believe there is some greater goodness linked to the private and parochial realms. These realms disapprove of the public realms because they also belong to strangers. She says:

“During the past few hundred years, the debate over the morality of life in one or another realms of city life has pitted the private and parochial realms – the worlds of domesticity and community – against the public realm – the world, we might say, of urbanity.” (Lofland 1989, 20)

Lofland thinks much along the same lines as Brill on the spread of the public realm into other areas, but also supposes that new forms of semi-public life have evolved, which she calls the “parochial” realm. These encompass places that are familiar, such as work or school, where a large part of our social learning takes place. Previously these places had been considered part of the public realm; however she argues that the public realm is one that is dominated by strangers. This gives it a different role than has been considered in the past, where it neither replaces the private or parochial realm, but supplements them. She agrees with Chidister that it is now a choice to participate in public life, but she sees this as a choice that we make to enhance our social lives.

Clare Cooper Marcus (1985, 1989, 1998) has been an important bridge between the formal implications of designers like Gehl and Whyte and the work of theorists like Brill and Lofland. Armed with the theories of Brill and Lofland, she has pursued an observational methodology in order to create a set of typologies of different kinds of open spaces and diverse plaza users to inform design guidelines for development of other open spaces.

She agrees that there has been a change in public life which has resulted in a diminished role for the plaza. However, she argues that even if these spaces only serve a limited population such as the lunchtime, office crowd that this is an important function nonetheless. If this is the case, she argues, then it makes sense to design places that will support these uses as well as other uses that will support a broader range of user groups; “Hopefully” she says, “the greater the variety of downtown open spaces, the more will each individual be able to find his or her particular niche” (Marcus 1989, 6).

Setha Low (2005) has also contributed greatly to the bridge between the design of public space and its social implications. Through careful observations of different ethnic groups in various parks, she was able to spot trends in the ways that these groups related to different activities in these parks. For example, while many different groups enjoyed eating

in parks, they all have different rituals around eating which require different amenities. She admits, however, that this kind of relationship between design and impact is much easier to observe after the fact, than it is to predict during the process of designing.

Euro-Urbanism

As has been eluded to above, there is a tendency to compare the public life of the US with that of Europe. This is borne out in the public open space with a design ideology Marcus calls "Euro-urbanism". The thought is that if open spaces in US cities are designed more like European ones, they will engender a European vibrancy of public life. These ideas are supported by the studies of Gehl and Whyte, but often in the translation to the US, architects have "grabbed the form and missed the essence" (Tunney Lee Interview 2/29/08).

Furthermore, those who believe that the US has a fundamentally different kind of public life than Europeans spurn this kind of environmental determinism, which discriminates against alternative forms of public life. Brill is especially critical of this kind of thinking;

"The literature that couples public life with public space often contains a condescending attitude: if we Americans want to see how public life and public place is done really well, we must go to Europe's historic urban centers (always, it seems, to the Piazza Di San Marco, the Piazza Navona, or Milan's Galleria) and, if we would only re-create these, we might be able to have that kind of public life here." (Brill 1989, 24)

As Alex Krieger (1995) put it, "There is only one Campo in Siena; redundancy in the public realm is one of our burdens" (p. 76).

Aside from Euro-urbanism perhaps being irrelevant to the form of public life peculiar to the US, it is also possibly irrelevant to the form of our cities. American cities have lower densities, different ways of organizing uses, and a much more diverse socio-economic structure than European countries, all of which combine to differentiate the nature of the use of public open space in the US (Marcus 1998).

The problem that Brill sees with Euro-urbanism is that it perpetuates a "strong nostalgia for an image of a dense, diverse, classless, and democratic public life lived in our streets, squares and parks, an image that was probably never true for us here in America" (Brill 1989, 24). Thus, spaces made to in the European image to encourage these kinds of uses often fail to engender the values they set out to achieve.

Public Life, Public Realm, Public Open Space, and Civic Space

“While a rich public life is generally considered desirable, it is seldom actually described. There may even be an underlying and simple assumption that what happens in public places is public life.” (Brill 1989, 26)

We can see that in the post-industrial city, unlike the pre-industrial city, that public life and public space are no longer tied to one another. Public spaces are no longer created to serve the same needs that they served in the pre-industrial city. By thinking of public life as separate from public space rather than assuming that public space is simply a setting for public life, design can take into account how public space can suit the specific needs of public life and respond to the various types of public life that a space should support.

With these questions about public life and the utility of public space, it is helpful to define some of the uses that city hall plazas support. In order to do this, we need to define the difference and relationship between public life, the public realm, and where civic space sits in relation to these.

To start, I will offer the definition of public life as a social interaction that happens in the public realm, and public space as one category of space that makes up the public realm. Civic plazas, and city hall plazas more specifically, are a type of public space that have a set of values placed on them which promote heterogeneous usership. The following definitions help establish this framework.

Brill attempts to create an ontological perspective of public life as a way of more narrowly defining the phenomena of public life. He agrees with Lofland that public life is one with strangers, but goes on to identify the following characteristics:

- freedom to assemble and associate;
- social experience is expanded;
- confronting the unknown;
- social learning is accelerated;
- public opinion about matters of social significance can be expressed;
- the power to “count” for something;
- individuals and groups can offer social presentations or productions and respond to those offered by others;

- commerce can be framed within a social mode of organization;
- and finally, that individuals can act as components of an information network. (Brill 1989)

All of these can take place on a public plaza, but they can also take place in an online chat-room, and that is exactly his point – that meaningful, social, public interactions take place in many different forms and contexts, and public open space, while an important component of public life, is only one of its many realms.

Lofland defines the public realm as the form of public life that occurs in the presence of strangers;

“The public realm... is defined as non-private sectors of urban areas in which individuals in co-presence tend to be personally unknown or only categorically known to one another. That is, while it is not quite accurate, it is nonetheless fair to say that... the public realm is the world of the street.” (Lofland 1989, 19)

She also classifies cities based on the strength or weakness of their public realms. She characterizes pedestrian-scale cities like San Francisco as having a “robust” public realm, and car-dependent cities like Houston as having a “less well developed” public realm – despite the fact that Houston may well have more public space through its extensive road network.

This tells us that while the public realm takes place in public places amongst strangers, a strong public realm does not depend on the amount of public open space but on the presence of the “public.” This extends beyond places that are publicly owned to include all places where one would find strangers, for example a shopping mall. It also depends on the quality of the public space, and its ability to draw a public.

Laurie agrees and points out that traditional ways of thinking about public open space are tied to quantity, rather than quality or equality of distribution;

“The two chief measures of the effectiveness of a city’s open space have been traditionally the ratio of total acres to total population, e.g. 10 acres per 1,000 people, and the distribution of those acres according to population density and service area distance. Few cities have achieved the quantitative standards they adopted or set themselves and where they have, equitable distribution is not achieved” (Laurie 1989, 48).

He finds this way of thinking not only limited, but perhaps backward. While it is common to think of the provision of open space in terms of size, he feels it is most important to think about open space in terms of increasing its usability.

Furthermore, the literature differentiates civic space from other kinds of public space because there is some conception that a civic space must be able to embody the values placed on the space to be responsive to its users. Literature on civic space puts forth two important ideals: it must embody the values of its constituents, and it must encourage the gathering of individuals to allow face-to-face interactions to take place between a diverse constituency.

In an article written by Lawrence Halprin entitled "Design as a Value System," (1989) Halprin references a conversation between Donald Lyndon and himself, in which they work out that "good" civic spaces are defined by their ability to be distinct and memorable; sustain exploration and continuing attention; allow for personal interaction; derive from multiple sources; be open to continuous change; and always respond to humor, fantasy, or aspiration. (Donald Lyndon quoted in Halprin 1989). This kind of latency, they agree, is difficult to achieve, but is generally found in places that bear out the cultural values of the community it is designed to serve. So, perhaps we can say that "representation of community values" is above all the ideal they feel a plaza must support.

Randolph T. Hester Jr. puts forth a similar design objective. He feels that "designers, by going through the design process, can actually play a role in re-establishing community." (Hester 1989, 74). This perhaps works a bit differently at different scales, but he makes the point that this can serve as an important element to help the people feel that they "own" a space and that their values and interests are being represented.

Richard L. Meier, in his essay, "The Civic Bond" (1974), explores the nature of man in the city, concluding that civcness is depended upon urbanity. This is specifically because "face-to-face interaction, which is most efficient by far in creating and maintaining groups, requires proximity" (Meier 1974, 403). He explains through complicated molecular metaphors that civic cohesion comes about through interactions that take place in the public sphere alone (as opposed to more familiar realms).

In a similar vein, Eamonn Canniffe, in his book *Urban Ethic: Design in the Contemporary City*, talks about the purpose of public space as a way to gather people together in community. He thinks of open space as the element of a city in which an ethical purpose is most fundamentally present. He states, "The meaning of urban public space rests in its

ability to gather individuals into a collective entity, with some sense of community thereby expressed” (Canniffe 2006, 88). For him also, it is about quality, not quantity, and the legibility of the space as a gathering place is paramount.

Taken from this, civic space becomes one place in the public realm where public life can be enacted amongst a truly heterogenous public that comes together, face-to-face, as a community with diverse interests.

The Privatization of Public Space

The traditional meaning of “public” refers to land or resources owned by the state. But even this definition is becoming blurred as increasingly governments look to private entities to create open spaces for the public (Marcus 1998). While in theory civic space is built in pursuit of democracy, many kinds of public spaces are being privatized, including civic space.

In light of a changed public life and the burden of costs associated with building and maintenance of open spaces, cities are re-evaluating their utility. Michael Laurie states that “The justification of expenditures for public open space in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century was based on theories, philosophies, and needs that are no longer self evident or realistic,” such as those which promoted open space as a relief from an overcrowded urban center (Laurie 1989, 48).

The use of public/private partnerships by cities to create public space is a trend that has emerged since the 1970's in Chicago and more famously in New York. In these cities, developers were given density bonuses if they built a public plaza at the ground floor. Since then, many cities have adopted similar incentives for the creation and maintenance of public open space, to the benefit of the cities in many cases, however the issue is highly contested (Marcus 1998).

On the one side are those who think that the provision of space by private entities – if regulated – can be a great amenity for the public, and that really these spaces are not generally as restrictive as they might seem (Marcus 1998). Two prominent counter-arguments emerge in the literature against this type of privatization of public space, which are that they can be exclusive to certain social groups and that they can deny certain freedoms that characterize truly public space. Design and defensive management are the tools used to exclude certain people and place limitations of freedoms.

The public nature of a plaza is highly dependent on its design, as well as the owner's attitude (Chidister 1989). In the seventies, many of the plazas that were built as a result of density bonuses were designed to deter the public, rather than provide an amenity for them. This was in part attributable to a lack of knowledge about the use of public space, and in part because the developers intended to deter undesirable people from using these spaces (Marcus 1998).

Today, cities have learned from the mistakes of New York and Chicago, and designers have learned much more about the way people use plazas. However, while there is much greater regulation on the design of these spaces, the fact remains that many of these plazas are still programmed or policed so as to exclude certain social groups, such as the homeless, adolescents, and the elderly (Marcus 1998). This exclusion itself is an impingement on the freedom to simply be in public.

As a society we prize our rights to speak and act freely in public, as this is where speaking and acting has the greatest impact. However, with the increasing privatization of public space and focus on media, the power of 'standing up to be counted' in public spaces is becoming limited (Brill 1989, 28). The same kind of defensive management tactics that are engaged to exclude certain groups from plazas are employed to restrict the ability to speak and act as we choose in public.

In many downtowns, citizens support these initiatives to keep plazas safe and provide a feeling of security, however as Brill points out, in truth "this is an erosion of civil liberties that will not be redressed in a right-wing climate" (Brill 1989, 29). This leads to plazas that cater to a narrower section of the population, which is comprised only of those who are encouraged or allowed to do so. Even when a plaza is built by a developer who supports its role as a truly public space, a change of management can dramatically change the role of the space (Chidister 1989).

The argument in favor of the preservation of public open space is similar to the argument for the preservation of open space in general. In her book on the privatization of public space and the commensurate losses of freedoms, Margaret Kohn shows how the movement toward privatization of public space is not easily reversed. It is important to preserve truly public spaces that "have immemorially been held...for purposes of assembly, communicating thoughts between citizens, and discussing public questions" (Kohn 2004, 12). By creating fewer truly public places in cities, these could become a diminished resource for future public expression in cities.

City Hall Plazas

As mentioned previously, there is not much theoretical writing on the design of city hall plazas specifically. Up to this point I have spent a considerable amount of time reviewing some of the thought about the uses and utility, as well as the issues with public space generally, but it is important to also consider what is important about city hall plazas beyond their publicness. There is some writing about the broader category of civic plazas, which I will attempt to refine to apply specifically to city hall plazas.

A city hall plaza is a more specific kind of civic plaza that acts as the door-step to local government, and plays an important role in fashioning the image of a particular city. To develop this aspect of city hall plazas more fully, we will look at literature which talks about how civic plazas generally are thought about, and how city hall plazas embody the same set of values as well as others, and finally the work of Charles T. Goodsell, who has written a book analyzing seventy-five city halls across the US.

If Euro-urbanism is a prominent theme in public open space, it has its most relevance to the civic plaza. What connects the civic plaza to ancient and medieval piazzas "is the image of the plaza as an open-air, heterogenous concentration of activity and focus of the city" (Chidister 1989, 32). But while the city hall plaza may relate most closely in image and form to pre-industrial public spaces, this does not secure their success, nor their future.

There are those who are critical of the ability of a civic plaza to maintain its relevance as private and parochial realms have grown in importance, and public life becomes redefined at a local level (Lofland 1989). Open spaces are local spaces, and Chidister believes that in the forms of the US post-industrial city open space only serves its direct neighborhood, not beyond. He goes on to say however, a civic plaza actually serves more purposes than other types of plazas because of its association with historic piazzas by linking to the ideal of heterogeny and diverse user groups.

Civic plazas, like all other plazas, have the ability to serve as a lunchtime destination, and a place for performances, but the public nature of civic plazas allows these places to be more heterogenous. Furthermore, they markedly differ from other kinds of plazas because of their potential for being the symbolic center of the city;

"Even though the entire citizenry can no longer gather in these places, they can become symbolic centers for key events in a community's life. In that same vein, the

civic plaza can become a repository of collective memory for a community, not only by sparking recollection of events it has held, but also as the vessel for monuments and tangible reminders of the past.” (Chidister 1989, 36)

In a democratic society that guarantees free speech to all citizens and theoretically encourages dialogue and participation with government, city hall plazas are unquestioningly in the public realm – that is, access is open to all citizens regardless of social distinctions. We can see that, whether or not the association is correct, these places connect most strongly to a tradition of open-air community based on the needs of an intensely public social life. In new plazas, this idea of collective memory may actually be made manifest in the idea of a plaza, which has played an important role in public life historically, rather than the specific memory of a space.

The function of a city hall as a place that represents its community is also based in city hall’s intense connection with government. A city hall plaza has just as much responsibility as the city hall itself to perform in a civic function and symbolically represent the city. Perhaps it even has more responsibility to do this, because it sits fully in the public realm, as the primary interface between the building and the public.

Brill also connects civic plazas with the ceremony of remembrance. “At times we are one public,” he says. “Public remembering of real history through the making of public remembrance rituals and public monuments continues to tie strangers together with the idea of a common heritage and a common covenant to remember that past” (Brill 1989, 29). A city hall plaza as a civic space of celebration and ritual can provide a place for these histories to be expressed – more so than other plazas because the city hall plaza is public, and tied directly to the interests of the city.

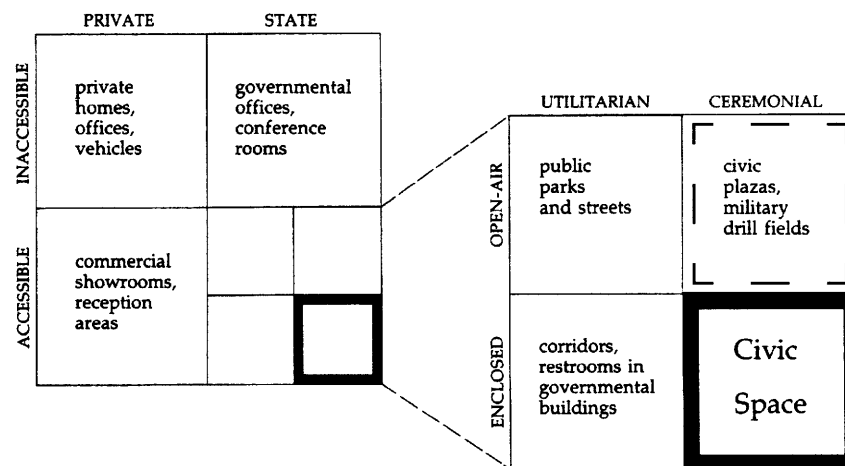
Finally, Goodsell attempts to draw some conclusions about the nature of government and how it chooses to present itself through architecture. He chooses to use architecture as his channel for research specifically because of the permanence and symbolism inherent to it;

“Architecture is used as a physical and therefore durable ‘readout’ of common tendencies in political life prevailing at the time of construction. Because those in power inevitably made an imprint on the huge public investments that are represented by governmental buildings, this interpretation reflects the shared values of political regimes and elites.” (Goodsell 1988, xv)

In order to develop a fuller theoretical framework, he draws upon sociology, anthropology, history, political science, psychology, linguistics, art history, architectural theory and history, and environmental psychology and design. Though he uses all of these lenses to view spaces, he restricts his study to a single functional class of space, which is the city council chamber.

Goodsell defines civic space with respect to four dimensions: (1) ownership or control, (2) accessibility to outsiders, (3) purpose or use, and (4) degree of enclosure. (This last one relates to his study of architectural spaces, and would not likely be a good assessment of public plazas, so we will drop it as a characteristic.) He differentiates civic space as a sub-category of public space, and in his diagram describing civic space, he shows civic plazas at the intersection of accessible, state owned, open-air, and ceremonial.

His definition of a civic space is one that can be described as “a relatively enclosed physical volume that is controlled by the state and in which ceremonies are performed before outsiders” (Goodsell 1988, 13). Again, if we remove the architectural element of enclosure, his definition can be applied to the city hall plaza. He goes on to later explain that “the ceremonial nature of civic space means that the ‘text’ of what we are reading reveals these values of rule in a more vivid and concentrated form than would be the case in purely utilitarian space” (Goodsell 1988, 196). So we see that civic space sits at the intersection of ceremony and utility, and due to its ceremonial nature, expresses its values more explicitly.



Delimiting civic space

Goodsell's conceptual location of Civic Space here outlined in black, the location of civic plazas in the dashed outline.

He conjectures that “civic space can be thought of as a kind of stage, with scenery and props designed and selected to convey a certain impression” (Goodsell 1988, 11). He also gets at the forms which create the “civicness” of civic space – what symbols define it, what scales and sizes evoke it. Generally these can be defined as “massiveness, ornateness, and formality” (Goodsell 1988, 28).

One of the authors he looks to is David Milne, who writes that public buildings, because they are built as monuments to a code of ethics, “perform a conservative, stabilizing function for the society” (Goodsell 1988, 29). Beyond the superficial need for public buildings to house bureaucratic functions, Milne thinks they also serve a political demand, that “architecture shall make edifices befitting the importance and power of these institutions appear mighty and durable, and that it shall, in this symbolism and expressive form, state dramatically something of these institutions’ ‘idea’ of the world” (Goodsell 1988, 29).

Another set of commentators that Goodsell quotes is Ada Louise Huxtable, Lois Craig, Robert Peck, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who are harsh critics of what Goodsell calls “contemporary” buildings (those built after the modernist revolution). Huxtable, Craig, Peck, and Moynihan call for more creativity and celebration of human scale designs, as well as decoration and symbolism appropriate to these kinds of buildings.

“Huxtable...denounces public buildings that seem to be designed for ‘an exploding office bureaucracy,’ rather than for ‘the large deeds of statesmen.’ Moynihan says that buildings should not make private citizens realize how unimportant they are,’ but instead should create ‘a public architecture of intimacy, one that brings people together in an experience of confidence and trust’” (Goodsell 1988, 24).

Goodsell references to James Marston Fitch, who believes that the design of civic space is not unlike church sanctuaries and theater auditoriums on a continuum of artistic freedom. This is taken to mean that the architect should exhibit variation and creativity in designs of buildings and spaces. This freedom, however, perhaps makes the design of these spaces more difficult. Goodsell mentions David Canter’s point that a room with a specified function facilitates consensus in determining a design for the space. For example it is much easier for people to agree on the form of a good kitchen which has a fixed purpose, than

the form of a good living room, which has a purpose less defined. A city hall plaza, with a purpose less defined, poses this same design challenge as the “good” living room.

Goodsell draws a number of dichotomies from his extensive research to help frame his investigation of these city hall councilor chambers. These include: the sacred versus the profane; solid versus void; front versus back; up versus down; left versus right; sociopetal versus sociofugal; and cohesive versus differentiating.

What is the Difference?

We can see that the uses of city hall plazas are broader and have more demands placed on them than other kinds of plazas. Specifically, there is a greater need for them to represent the values of their constituents, including the values that the city as a whole wants to portray.

We can also begin to see how there might be challenges in getting the form and the ideals to line up, and several mounting dichotomies:

- A city hall plaza represents the ideals of the historic piazza of democracy and heterogeneity, which we have shown to be a false model to begin with.
- It must also be a place where public life can be enacted amongst a heterogeneous public that comes together as a community with diverse interests, but must at the same time be a place that represents the values of the city as a whole.
- It must thirdly find some way of being relevant in a form of public life that is perhaps less concerned with public spaces.
- And it must do all of this in a climate of increasing pressure toward privatization of public space; an idea that is antithetical to the heterogeneous plaza to begin with.

A city hall plaza is different than any other kind of plaza because it has undue pressure to achieve dichotomous goals. This is certainly not immediately evident upon first inspection of these places. These dichotomies will become more evident through the exploration of the specific case studies to follow.

CHAPTER 3

Austin City Hall Plaza

“In a capital city where much architecture is ordinary, City Hall is extraordinary...The final accolade goes to you the taxpayer and voter. This is your building, so take a bow. Not just any city would have the guts to build this City Hall. Use it. In the City Store, you can buy your in-laws a snow globe and pick up a toy model of an Austin fire truck for the kids, then cross the atrium to council chambers and say your peace. As if you need any encouragement.” (Austin American Statesman 11/28/2004)

Austin City Hall has staked the success of its City Hall plaza on the two biggest achievements of Austin: live music and a strong connection with nature.

Austin bills itself as the “live music capital of the world” (City of Austin Website) which is no small claim to make. To earn this title, they have an annual music festival that is one of the largest in the country, and dozens of bars and restaurants featuring live music almost any night of the week.

Austin also claims to be very connected with nature. The vast majority of Austin’s public spaces are parks, many associated with the Colorado River and Shoal Creek and very accessible to the urban population (Naccarato Interview 3/18/2008). It is no wonder that Austin has decided to promote these two aspects of its identity in the program and design of the City Hall plaza.

OPEN SPACE CONTEXT

Austin is located in a hot, dusty climate which makes for uncomfortable outdoor spaces for half of the year. The result is a population that understandably prefers the air conditioned environs of their cars to the drudgery of walking in a hilly, hot landscape (Evins Interview 3/24/2008). While the weather may not support walking, the downtown was developed on a very walkable grid.



The city of Austin was created on a grid pattern called the Waller Grid that measures 300 feet square, originating in a network of square blocks making up the downtown area. In the original layout, there were four blocks that were kept free of development as public open space. Two of these have been developed and the other two, Republic and Wooldridge Squares, remain intact as landscaped parks.

Republic Square is currently a poorly designed and underutilized park. It was redeveloped in the seventies with berms to resemble rolling lawns and trees so as to be more attractive to motorists driving by. This has created a space that hides people in the park from one another, and the result is a popular resting place for transient people.

Near City Hall is one of the few hardscaped plazas in Austin, owned and managed by the University of Texas, which has actually been quite successful as a lunchtime destination (Ebersol Interview 3/24/2008). This is largely because it provides ample shade, a water feature that provides mist, and provides seating both in the form of steps and tables with chairs.

A popular tourist attraction is the state capital with its vast lawn and wide linear pathway lined with historic statues, and fountains, leading on axis from the front gates of the site up to the front door of the building. Meanwhile, a common destination for locals is the Town Lake portion of the Colorado River, which has picnic grounds and linear greenways that provide space for biking, walking, and running.

There are several other bodies of water that have a similar system of greenways, including



Republic Square is currently a popular park for transient people, and will soon be redesigned as a civic plaza. *Photo: Kristen Hall*



The lawn at the Capitol is a destination for tourists and locals alike. *Photo: Kristen Hall*

Shoal Creek, Barton Creek and its associated Greenbelt, the Colorado River and its lakes and parks. Zilker Park is the site of the Austin City Limits musical event which draws people from around the country.

In this context we can see that much of the outdoor recreation in Austin takes place along the edges of downtown, either on the highly formal grounds of the Capital, or the informal water-associated sites. This leaves little perceived need for formal or urban open space. In speaking with city official Fred Evins (on the staff of the Economic Growth and Redevelopment Services) about this phenomena, he explained that while many residents often call for public open space, in actuality the City of Austin feels that the streets take on the role of the urban plazas. To support this, the City is pursuing a Great Streets program to enhance the quality of the streetscape and pedestrian experience.

BACKGROUND

Austin, as much as any other American city in the seventies and eighties, was suffering from a lack of investment downtown as a result of the population and the jobs moving out to the suburbs. The City was eager to capture business activity downtown and to help bring revenues back to the city.

A major computer company, Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC) was thinking about locating its offices outside the city, in the Barton Creek Aquifer where they could have a secure, beautiful campus surrounded by nature. This decision would move a valuable company outside of the center, and right into the middle of the city's main water source. The City recognized this as an important opportunity to protect their water resources, and also an opportunity for growth downtown if they could convince the CSC to locate in Austin's CBD.

It took some negotiating, but in 1974, the City Manager at the time finally persuaded the CSC to locate their offices downtown, along Town Lake (Evins Interview 3/24/2008). This would allow them to be near nature as they had desired, and the City made some concessions to support the CSC's need for a secure campus. The CSC would lease three of the blocks from the City, located on three sides of the parcel that had already been designated for the future City Hall, and at the time, was the City Hall Annex.

In order to address CSC's concerns for securing their campus, the City allowed them to build a passage underground between two of their buildings, running under the City Hall block. In order to protect their views to Town Lake, the CSC negotiated that the future City Hall would have a maximum of four floors, and a 140' setback from the side of the block that faces on the river.

There was little public knowledge of the arrangement between the CSC and the City Manager (Reed Interview 3/25/2008). Furthermore, the agreement had been struck before plans for the future City Hall had been developed. When the development market downtown grew again twenty-five years later, and the City decided that it was time to start plans for the new City Hall, people were shocked to realize that the scale of the building had been predetermined through a quiet, back room agreement.

The Master Plan

The Master Plan for the plaza called for a plaza that should be above all a "place for people," thus the form of the plaza should support programmatic and functional elements, but should also "foster an environment of feeling at home" (Austin City Hall and Public Plaza Program 2000, Section 2.1). The previous City Hall was described as "giving the impression to 'Go away!'" and the functions of the City Hall were scattered around separate locations downtown. The new City Hall was to have a more inviting presence and collect the City's functions into one accessible building.

The plan outlined first and foremost that the functions of the new plaza were to be accessible to all people at all times and provide public amenities such as drinking fountains and bathrooms for all citizens of Austin. It goes on to deal with programmatic elements of various types of entertainment including highly programmed events such as musical performances and speeches, to informal meetings, to a casual “place for people to play board games, a place to read and relax” (Austin City Hall and Public Plaza Program 2000, Section 3.2). The City also wanted the plaza to have a sculptural quality so provide a place for photo opportunities and for visitors to admire.

To accomplish this, the City listed out eight goals, after a public input process that the plaza should:

- Be genuine: it should feel as though it ‘grew out of its place’ and should feel comfortable and inviting to everyone.
- Be touchable: it should be a place that anyone can come up and ‘touch,’ be interactive and designed to be used.
- Have a presence on Second Street, and acknowledge and respect the active and the passive characteristics of the location.
- Be accessible to all users and meet or exceed all local state and federal accessibility guidelines
- Contain a variety of public, semi-public, and private spaces that should come in a variety of sizes ranging from small, intimate, contemplative spaces to large, open, public spaces.
- Be designed to promote safe, easily understood linkages to adjacent retail activities and to the recreational activities of Town Lake.
- Be designed to promote an environment of safety and security to all its users
- Be an opportunity to create a memorial to civil service and non-civil service employees who have lost their lives in the line of duty.

(Paraphrased from the Austin City Hall and Public Plaza Program 2000, Section 3.3)

The plan also outlines that shade is an essential element for the success of the plaza and that all methods of providing shade should be first priority. Water is another element that is stressed in the plan as both an interactive and symbolic feature. The plan indicates

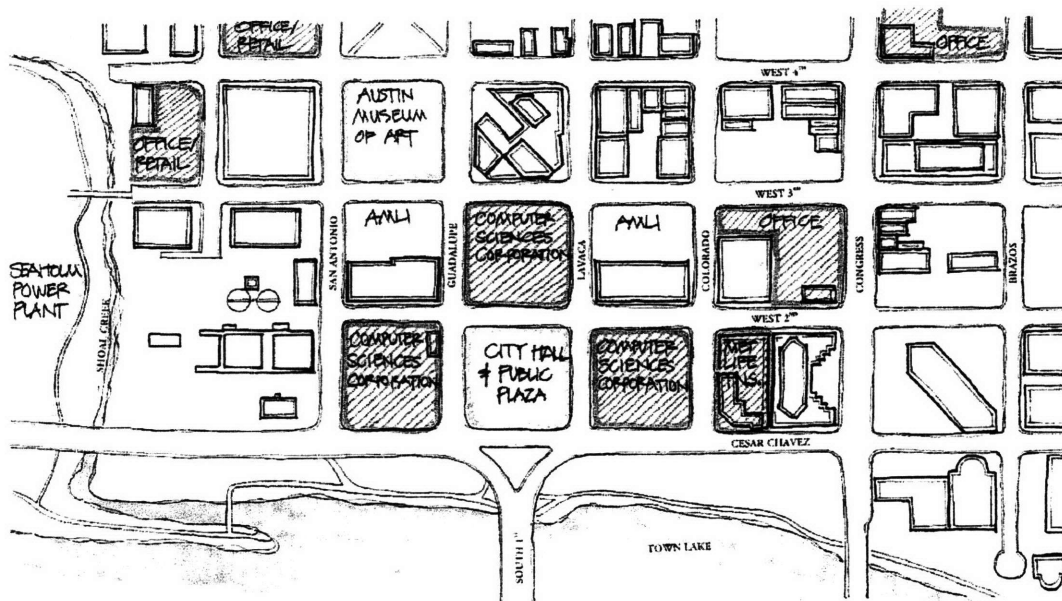
that the “overwhelming feelings of the citizens...have expressed a strong desire to have a plaza that is comprised of softscape” as opposed to hardscape.

There were several aspects of the site plan that were debated in the design community. The large setback from the river and the four-floor height restrictions severely constrained the program of the new City Hall. The location of the plaza on the South side of the building would expose users to the hot, uncomfortable Austin sun.

The City had also recently begun an initiative to turn Second Street into a major retail corridor and as Second Street runs along the north side of City Hall it would have made more sense to locate the plaza along this street. Now the space could miss out on the activity being generated there if not carefully designed. Regardless of these concerns, the agreement the City had entered with the CSC was binding, and as the CSC still occupied the neighboring site, there would be no changes to the plan.

City Hall and Plaza

The City sent out a Request for Qualifications for the design of the building, looking for architects who had experience with civic buildings in particular. They assembled a short list of architects who were then asked to send in some design ideas for the project. One architect, Antoine Predock stood out, with his mural-sized, collaged interpretation of Austin. This free-flowing, artistic style, combined with the architect’s familiarity with the city and



The new City Hall fits within a larger plan for future development of the Second Street Retail District and lies at the center of the Computer Sciences Corporation campus. *Source: Austin City Hall and Public Plaza Program, 2000).*

aesthetic style rooted in the southwest was a winning combination to represent the essence of Austin in the new City Hall.

Antoine Predock was contracted as lead architect on the project, and a design team was assembled with local architects Cotera + Reed acting as the Architects of Record. At the beginning of the process, the team went on a bus tour around Austin, gathering ideas of what should be included in the design of the space. On the trip, they went out to Barton Creek, where Predock became fascinated with the balcones, a naturally occurring rock-terrace formation that is common in the hill country outside of Austin. He was inspired to make a quick pastel sketch of the balcones that informed many of his design ideas afterwards. (Ebersol Interview 2/25/2008)

Predock was not best known for his receptiveness to public input and had to change his design process to accommodate the ideas of the citizens of Austin, who were heavily involved from the beginning. The public outrage at the secrecy of the process up until that point had to be managed, and the City responded to this by making the rest of the process as open as possible. To solicit feedback, the City set up a storefront on a prominent street downtown that housed models of the proposed building and a video of Predock describing the design concept, and invited citizens to provide feedback on 3" x 5" cards.

Over 2,000 cards were received with comments encompassing everything from the programmed events that should take place in the space, to the materials that should be used. The comments were analyzed by the City, who then challenged Predock to modify the



Predock's drawing of the City Hall evokes the natural surroundings of Austin's Hill Country. Source: *Austin City Hall Information Booklet*

building and the plaza to address the public's concerns. This extensive process led him to label Austinites "terminally democratic" – a phrase they have adopted with great pride.

Public participation was one factor in determining some of the program and design of the plaza. However the CSC, as the organization that had helped create the strict building envelope of the City Hall and as an abutter became somewhat of a regulatory participant. Most of the preliminary design decisions were made in one meeting between the design team and the CSC. Predock had brought several blocks of clay to the meeting that he lay out and began shaping into vague forms representing the building envelope. As he stood there with the clay, he turned one slab this way or that and asked the CSC what was acceptable.

In this fashion, he managed to negotiate a building shape that projected out past the building envelope on all four sides. On the plaza side, he laid a slab of clay slanting from the roof down to the plaza, and asked if this would be acceptable and not impede the views from each building to the river. CSC agreed, and the amphitheater was born.

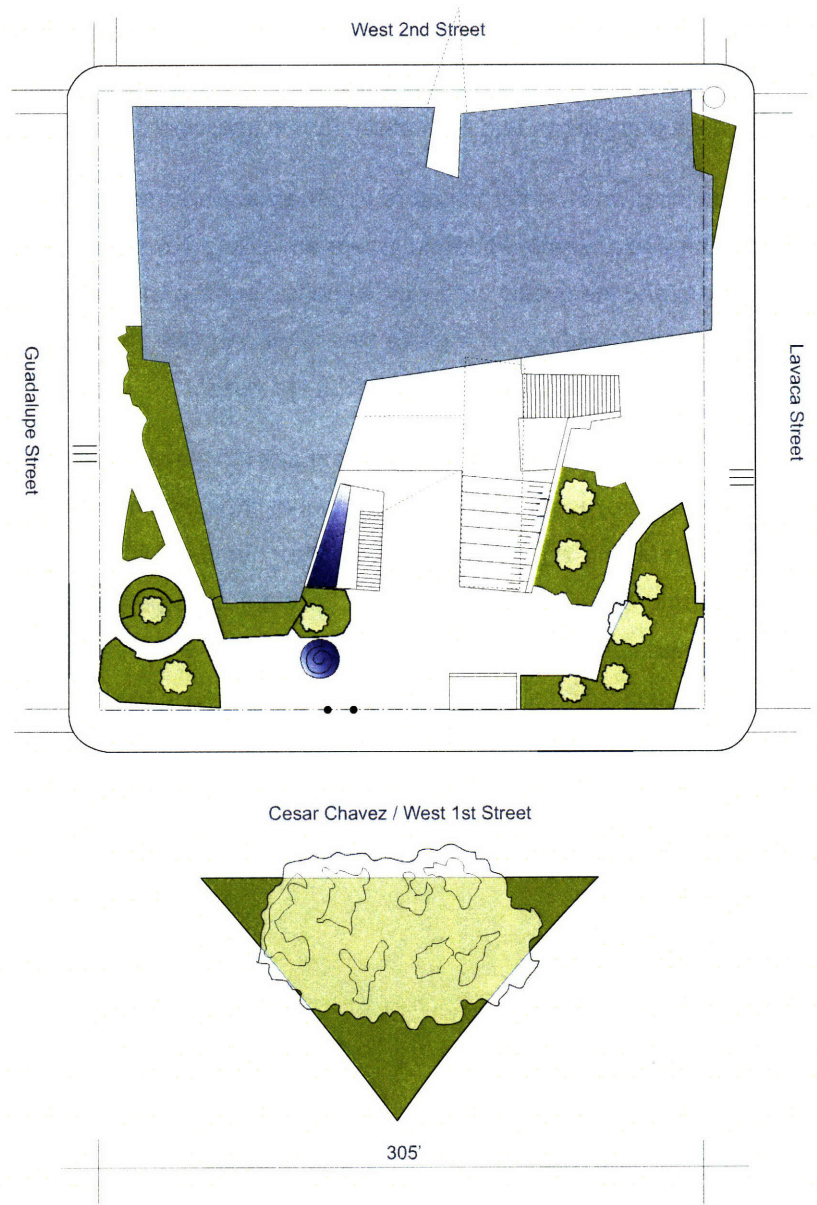
CHALLENGES TO SUCCESS

Austin's City Hall Plaza has been successful at capturing the lunchtime work crowd by bringing live music and food vendors to the site during Friday afternoon lunch hours. It is also conveniently located near the farmer's market that takes place down the street. However, according to Austin Design Committee Member and architect on the project, Phil Reed, this success is fragile, and could be threatened by even one more plaza that provides the same amenities (Reed Interview 3/25/2008).

Austin City Hall's plaza is only the second pedestrian plaza that caters to the downtown walking population, and the most highly programmed of the two. A little further up the street, the nappy Republic Square will soon be converted from a park to a civic square, hosting a Federal Courthouse, an art museum, and other civic uses. One of the streets will be closed to vehicle traffic, and the square will be redone as a hardscaped civic plaza. If this square is successful, Reed is worried that it will draw the small downtown plaza-going population away from the City Hall's plaza. He fears there are just not enough plaza-goers in the city to populate two plazas.

His solution to the problem is to have the new plaza program some retail space to occupy the open space until the urban population of Austin has a chance to grow, and then in ten years or so, they can take down the structure and make it a public space when it is needed.

Generally it is easier to preserve public open space than tear down a building to create it, and this could become a problem, as Austin is undergoing a period of immense growth. Currently there are only about 6,000 people who live downtown, and commensurately, not many services. However, services and residential development are poised to grow, and it is anticipated that the city will grow to at least 25,000 residents within the next ten years (Evins Interview 3/24/2008).



In the above plan it becomes clear that green space is a significant portion of the plaza. It also shows how the building has extended beyond the allotted 140' setback. *Source: Kristen Hall*

ANALYSIS

In my visits to the plaza combined with my conversations with the designers of the space, the I noticed that the following elements were important in the design.

Symbolism

From the selection of Predock, to the trip out to the hill country, the project was destined to be heavily connected with the natural elements of Austin. Also, the site is bordered on one side by Austin's Downtown, and the scrubby, steeply sloping banks of the Colorado River on the other. Predock felt that the transition between these two conditions necessitated a response that was at once urban and naturalistic (Evins Interview 3/24/2008).

The form of the building was to refer to nature and the plaza was seen to be an extension of the building. The plaza was designed to create an inviting flow from the plaza into the lobby of the building, and the quality of "feeling at home" that the City of Austin was hoping to communicate with the building. The plaza was to be park-like, in line with the popular system of parks already enjoying success in the City of Austin.

The elements on the south side of the building that shape the plaza are an attempt to relate the building to the natural, ruggedness of the river landscape (Reed Interview 3/25/2008). Predock wanted the building to look almost like another hump of hill along the river's edge – a naturally occurring element of the city. The front entrance pulls back into the building, with the amphitheater jutting out past it, creating a funnel toward the front doors of the building. The plaza forms its largest amount of hardscape in the middle, with the two corners dissolving into softscape.



The Treaty Oak Sapling sits at the center of concentric rings which indicate the growth of the tree over the next few decades. *Photo: Kristen Hall*

Taking advantage of the city's public art program, they hired artist Nobuho Nagasawa to create a sculptural landscape with a sapling from the regionally significant Treaty Oak. The arrangement is cosmic in symbolism with each of nine boulders representing the nine planets revolving around the tree, with seating integrated.

While the cosmic theme may have little to do with Austin specifically, the installation invites people to come sit on it, and children to climb on it. Lastly, the pavement around the tree has rings set in pavers to indicate the projected canopy of the Treaty Oak sapling over the next few decades. This reference to the change over time is also reflected in the copper-lined exterior of the building itself, which will change colors as it ages.

Hardscape vs. Softscape

The question of hardscape versus softscape was a difficult one for the designers to make. There was a fair amount of push in both directions over the issue: the public expressed a desire for softscape, and yet the designers knew that plant material would not stand up to frequent, intense use, nor is softscape consistent with the image of an urban plaza.

Austin calls itself "the Music Capital of the World," a strong brand that naturally dictated that the program for the City Hall would revolve around music and performance. Taking this as an obvious starting point, the plan formed around a stage and an amphitheater. The venue would require hardscape for a large portion of the plaza, as this would be more durable than lawn.

The resulting design concentrates hardscape in the large central portion near the amphitheater, but it also provides an ample amount of grass to one side with granite slabs laid out for bench-like seating, and to the other side of the plaza is a section of clustered plantings. This gives the effect of highlighting the landscape features and creating the feeling of a plaza circled by park, but actually does not take up much programmable space with park.



Softscape was used to make the plaza feel more like a park. *Photo: Kristen Hall*

Despite the significant presence of hardscape, the edges of the plaza still feel much like a park. This remains a controversial aspect of the plaza in the design community. Fred Evins mentioned that at a symposium he attended, he was approached by the architect Andres Duaney, who complimented the building, but criticized the plaza as not being 'urban' enough. However, In some ways it seems that the informality and park-like aspects of the plaza could be attributed with much of the plaza's success, as this was a major element in the public input (Evins Interview 3/24/2008).

Sunlight

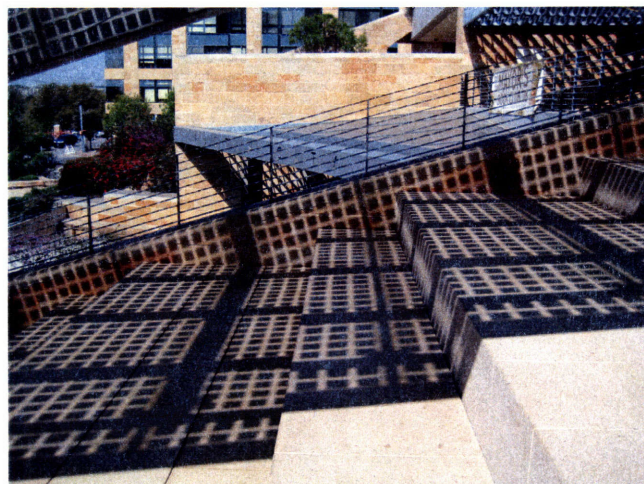
It was obvious that shade had to be an integral part of the plaza, to mitigate the harsh effects of the sun on the plaza. The choice of lighter colored limestone and granite help keep the hardscape cool, but also make a bright surface to look at. Trees are an important element in the design of the park, which called for large shade trees especially in the grassy area to the east of the plaza. The sun moves from the east to the southwest, so to shade this portion of the plaza for the hottest hours was imperative.

However, the trees that were planted have not done so well in their new environs. Though they were almost fully mature when they were planted, the city is still waiting for them to take to their new home and begin fill out. These also had to be strategically placed for maximum support from the parking garage underneath the plaza, and so perhaps are not as carefully placed for aesthetic or shade value as they should be.

Amphitheater

The amphitheater is significant for several reasons. The first and most obvious being that it responds to the desire to program the space for musical events. The second function

The amphitheater provides shade and a constantly changing pattern on the steps. *Photo: Kristen Hall*



it serves is as a major shade structure. The amphitheater itself is not a significant shade structure, but Predock designed a canopy that cantilevers over the amphitheater. Its construction of photovoltaic cells gives the desired visual reference to the “greenness” of the building, but more importantly, it provides a large portion of the plaza (and the largest amount of seating) with shade, and creates the feeling of an outdoor room. It also creates a beautiful patterned effect that moves across the steps with the sun.

The other, less desirable effect of the amphitheater is that it clearly demarcates one side of the plaza from the other and provides a large, visual barrier. The projecting edge of the building on the southwest side of the plaza also creates this effect. One could argue that this actually creates separate spaces that are more intimate, but the sum total effect is to create a feeling of disconnectedness from other sections of the plaza. In the event of large civic gatherings this could give the impression of diminishing the perceived size of the event, and thus diminishing its perceived importance and power.

Edges

Another impediment to the quality of the performance space is the busy street that the plaza faces, Cesar Chavez Street, a state-owned right of way. Part of the original design was to re-route this busy street around the Draco Triangle that forms a large intersection with First Street. While this would have been fairly simple to do in design terms, the state was not flexible on the alignment of the easement, and the street remains a major barrier between the plaza and access to the Colorado River.

As described previously, the City Hall is located along Second Street which is currently being targeted for commercial corridor development. The location of the plaza along Cesar Chavez, as opposed to Second Street has impaired its ability to connect to this pedestrianized environment successfully.



Had the plaza been extended out to the Draco Triangle as planned, it would have been much bigger. *Photo: Kristen Hall*

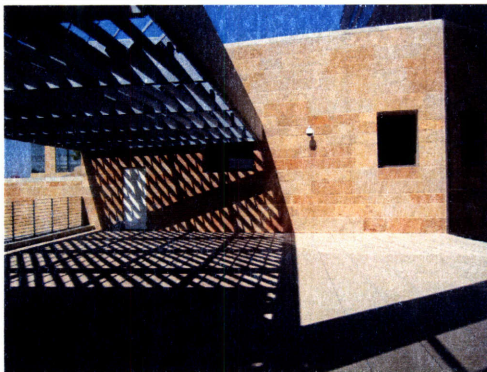
One intervention that has helped the plaza connect with the retail along Second Street is the strategic location of the entrance to the parking garage directly on the plaza. The parking garage at City Hall is the closest parking structure to the emerging shopping district, and by having the entrance on the plaza, this forces people to walk across it in order to leave or enter the parking garage on foot.

Size

The most important factor in determining the size of the plaza is the existing block pattern and the envelope determined by the CSC agreement. Had the building been able to be higher-rise, the program could have been consolidated onto a smaller quantity of space, allowing more space to be allocated for the plaza.

The plaza design creates pockets of smaller spaces on all four corners of the block, as well as spaces accessed from within the building. Flexibility of space was an important part of the plan. These smaller spaces were to be seen as continuations of the larger space that could be activated during larger events, without giving the feeling of a vast empty space when there are no events. While it is thoughtful for them to consider this, the hierarchy of spaces and their edges are such that one cannot sit with ones back to a wall and see the larger plaza, which makes these smaller spaces seem more comfortable.

There are also separate elevated balconies that can look down on the main part of the plaza, however, they are disconnected from the rest of the plaza and two of the three spaces can only be accessed from within the building (one of them from the Mayor's Chambers). These spaces do indeed serve as increased plaza space, but they do not increase public access to the larger public events. A better plan would have been to continue the stairway



An upper tier of the plaza allows large crowds to spread outward and upward, but feels disconnected from the rest of the plaza. *Photo: Kristen Hall*



The Second Street Retail District shown here with Austin's City Hall emerging on the top left corner. *Photo: Kristen Hall*

that provides access to the second level of the plaza up through these other plaza spaces, and not have them attached to proprietary places such as the Mayor's Chambers.

Another effect attributable to the inability to realign Cesar Chavez Street was on the overall size of the plaza. Had Cesar Chavez been realigned, the plaza would have incorporated the Draco Triangle, which would increase the size of the plaza considerably. The plan for this space towards Cesar Chavez would have been designed to slowly transform into more of a prairie-like landscape with trees and grasses to screen the traffic and provide more shade. The fact that this was not accomplished has yielded a much smaller and noisier plaza, and pushed most of the program away from the street, toward the City Hall building.

Grain of Development

Being that the plaza faces away from the Second Street Retail District, the designers decided to continue the retail frontage along Second Street, rather than allow the City Hall to create a gap in the activity. The ground floor of the City Hall has a coffee shop and a storefront flanking both sides of the entry into the building.

The storefront was originally an "Austin Store" which sold paraphernalia relating to Austin. The store was never able to support itself, and the City had been supporting it with tax dollars, until it was decided this was a misuse of taxpayers funds, and shut the store down. Now the space is scheduled to re-open as a runner's shop that sells athletic shoes.

These stores have no connection with the main plaza and the coffeeshop has its own outdoor seating. While the City Hall does mesh well with the existing grain of development, it was not able to use this to activate the plaza through retail or other uses to tie into the Second Street Retail District.

Activation

Activation is an important element in the plan, both to get people to the plaza for events and to promote civic participation. As mentioned, music played an important role in the program of the plaza. A stage was constructed on the southern edge of the plaza which faces the amphitheater directly. It is visible from anywhere on the main portion of the plaza, but less so toward the Treaty Oak installation. The stage has multiple forms of amplification and is well equipped with technology for performances. It currently has a temporary tent raised above it to block the performers from the sun. It is clearly a temporary solution that calls for a more permanent intervention.

To demonstrate the City's commitment to creating a space where open dialogue is invited the building has provided a "protest window" outside of the Council Meeting Room. The idea of the window is to provide space for protesters to be seen during Council meetings, without interrupting the process. Perhaps this is a half-baked way of incorporating feedback, or a clever way of keeping protesters out of the meetings where they can be seen and heard. Either way, it seems a flimsy attempt at promoting democratic participation. The effect of the window is further weakened by its location on a wide bit of sidewalk adjacent to the parking garage entrance, and far away from the larger, more imageable plaza.

Water

Water has been incorporated well into the design of the space, as water resources are extremely important to the City. The plan outlines this element as an important addition to the City Hall to refer to the local politics of water, and also as a reference to nature more generally.

There are two features that are water-oriented; one is a circular fountain, where water flows down a "vortex"-like ramp into a drain. This feature allows people to interact with the water, as well as cool their feet in the hot months. Because the fountain drops into the pavement with no formal edge, the design raised concerns with disability advocates,



The 'vortex' of water on the plaza seems to refer to the disappearance of the resource.
Photo: Kristen Hall



Air conditioning condensate falls from rocks composed to look like a naturally occurring formation in Austin's hill country
Photo: Kristen Hall

and they asked that there be barriers placed around the fountain so people would not fall into it. The solution was to encircle it with more of the limestone blocks that were used for benches around the rest of the plaza, and the result is an awkwardly tight circle of these blocks. A better solution might have been a more formal treatment of the edge with different materials or lights to indicate a change in grade.

The other water feature has been built into the limestone blocks that make up one wall of the building as it descends into the parking garage. A spill of water cascades down the blocks, referring to the way water seeps out of the balcones in the hill country outside of Austin. Because of the natural materials and the way the water pools at the bottom, the metaphor is easily understood. Furthermore, the water used here is condensate from the air conditioning system of the building, and as it falls, it helps cool the parking garage.

Maintenance

Because the plaza is owned, maintained and programmed by the City of Austin, they required a plaza that would be easy to maintain at minimal cost. This was a carefully determined in the selection of materials that would sustain their appearance with minimal input, and in fact, the building and plaza are supposed to show changes over time with the growth of the Treaty Oak Sapling reflected in the rings in the pavement, and the changing copper clad building.

The removal of the Austin Store in the ground floor of the building also shows the City's commitment to not wasting taxpayer's dollars to sustain the vibrancy of the development. Turning it over to private interests is seen as a more sustainable way of maintaining activity there.

The design is meant to sustain itself, but this is not the only reference to sustainability in the plaza – and certainly not the most obvious. The canopy of photovoltaic cells over the amphitheater and the cascade of condensation from the air conditioning system which is meant to cool the garage are both clear nods towards the building and plaza's ability to self sustain without much energy or waste.



The temporary structure to shelter performers on stage looks exactly that. *Photo: Kristen Hall*

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The themes of the plaza are nature and music, which it successfully portrays. While there is perhaps not enough shade in the plaza as a result of the trees not taking to their surroundings, the plaza still manages to effect a park-like feeling. During my time there I only ever observed three people lingering in the plaza, although I was told that the Friday evening before I arrived was the first night of their annual concert series that had drawn a large crowd. Other than that I saw many people crossing the plaza to the parking garage, and a few skateboarders doing tricks on the steps.

The amphitheater was a striking object on the plaza, as the photovoltaic awning cast a dramatic shadow that was always changing. It shaded me well from the heat of the day as I sat observing the mostly empty plaza. As I sat, I could hear the activity of Second Street in the lull between moments of traffic on Cesar Chavez St. I could also see glimpses of the Town Lake from the top of the amphitheater, but the awning blocked the view.

The amphitheater, a civic object in the center of the plaza, dominated the area, and as one sits on it, it directs attention toward the stage. This creates the desired effect of making a space for performance, but when one sits atop the steps, the rest of the plaza is hard to observe. This is the case from most points on the plaza – there is no one vantage point that allows a person to see the whole plaza.

The terracing was supposed to give the plaza flexibility to become a larger or smaller space as necessary, and its ability to do this is questionable. In Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, he indicates that open spaces are supposed to flow in a hierarchy of spaces towards the larger space, so that a person sitting in a smaller space can have their back to a wall and see the larger space. The opposite is true of most of the plaza's small spaces, which are fragmented from the larger space and face onto the street.

Also, the plaza was also supposed to flow into the building, drawing people inside and making them feel comfortable. The entrance is pulled back from the plaza, which creates a funnel-like entryway, but once I entered the building, I had to pass through a security screening. The security officer was friendly, but the checkpoint ruins the feeling of the plaza flowing into the building, and raises the question of whether this was the intention of the City to begin with.

This question of true intention is raised again with the protest window located outside the Council Chambers that expects people to voice their opinions silently outside whilst decisions are being made inside. Between protest and performance, the performance intention of the plaza is clearly dominant. A large amount of people attending a music concert at City Hall is a public event, and Austin feels it is a civic one as well.

CHAPTER 4

Seattle Civic Center

Seattle is well known for its coffee shops and liberal views. It is also a city of neighborhoods, where residents self-identify with a district rather than the city of Seattle (Romano Interview 3/7/2008). The City hopes to support the former and change the latter with the creation of a new Civic Center to become the “civic heart” of downtown Seattle. It will be composed of the new City Hall, a mixed use tower, food and drink retail, and it will all be focused around a new civic square.

OPEN SPACE CONTEXT

Homelessness is a major issue for Seattle’s open spaces, and homeless people can be found in downtown Seattle, from residential streets to popular tourist destinations like Pike Place Market (Romano Interview 3/7/2008). The area for the new Civic Center is no different, as it is located adjacent to a large homeless shelter, and City Hall Park (which is ironically located at the base of the County’s courthouse) a favorite hang-out for many homeless people (Seattle Times 4/20/2005). In addition, there are various human services agencies around that also help to attract drug addicts and transient people to the area.

Another issue for Seattle’s open space is the fact that Seattle, on average, only gets 58 days of sun each year (KOMOTV 8/31/2006). This makes those few sunny days very important, but it also makes open spaces less prone to sunlight and thus less comfortable to spend time in.

Despite these challenges, the City of Seattle has been able to make some quality open spaces. The most recent example of this is the Olympic Sculpture Park which connects with a bike and pedestrian path that runs along Eliot Bay. Some other well known places in the city are their Green Streets, which have provided a model for other cities to pursue stormwater management through improved streetscaping.

Seattle Center is a popular park, built in 1962 when Seattle hosted the World's Fair, and home to the iconic Space Needle, Frank Ghery's new Experience Music Project, and Seattle's monorail. Seattle also has a Green Ring of open space around the perimeter of the city, soon to be supplemented by the Blue Ring, which is an inner circle of urban open spaces and Green Streets. Another major open space for the city is Westlake Plaza, built as part of the Westlake Shopping Center, which is a wide, open plaza that has hosted many protests, including the infamous 1999 Battle of Seattle riots against the World Trade Organization.

Most agree that the city would benefit from more open space, especially in the downtown area, however new open space means different things to different people (Seattle Post-Intelligencer 4/29/2005). On a radio program dedicated to the topic of the new Civic Square project, there were various issues that emerged. These included concerns of the homelessness issue in the city and how this might affect the plaza and the commensurate need to activate any new open space. The desire to have a new park rather than a new plaza was also expressed, in addition and various differing ideas of what Seattle stands for and how this should be designed.

BACKGROUND

Note: As this is written, the City Hall and its plaza are complete, however the Civic Square anticipated across the street is in its final stages of design review, and currently the site is undergoing preparations for building the underground garage.

Seattle sits in an earthquake-prone area, and due to the age of most of its public buildings, is in the process of replacing the older structures with seismically fit ones. The



The former location of City Hall, called the Municipal Building. Source: City of Seattle Website.

Municipal Building, which was the former location of Seattle's City Hall, and the adjacent Public Safety Building, were both candidates for retrofit. Furthermore, the City's departments were spread out around the downtown, and the City wanted to gather these into one concentrated area and create a Civic Center complete with a new, distinct City Hall.

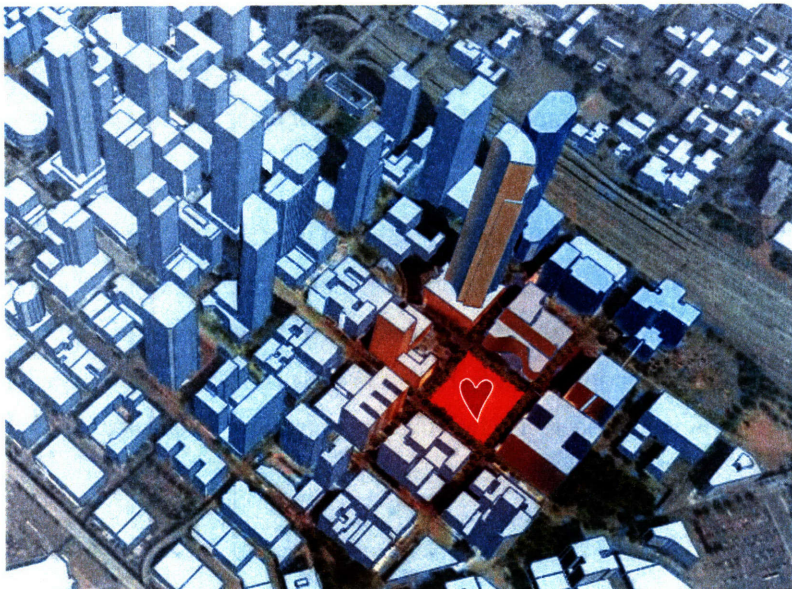
Before the new City Hall was built the mayor's offices and the city council chambers were located in the Municipal Building, which was considered

outdated and unfriendly (Seattle Civic Center Master Plan 1999). The mayor at the time, Paul Schell, had called it “an embarrassment,” and urban legend has it that the plans for the building were copied from a hotel in Texas – nobody had ever claimed them (Seattle Post-Intelligencer 6/21/2003) When the building was first built, an the nicest thing architectural critique had to say about it was, “Toilet facilities seem adequate” (Seattle Post-Intelligencer 6/21/2003). It was clear the city needed a new City Hall that would serve as a better symbol for the city, and as a point of pride.

The city waited for an upswing in the downtown office-building market before deciding to sell off some of their properties around the area at a favorable price. Following the sale of several buildings, the city consolidated most of their departments into the recently acquired Key Tower, and constructed the Seattle Justice Center next door, which was completed as part of the renovations in 1998. This left the Municipal Building and the Public Safety Building open for redevelopment under the guidelines set out by the 1999 Seattle Civic Center Master Plan.

The Master Plan

The plan to redevelop the area is seen as the opportunity to create a center for government that appears more open to the public and supportive of public life in the city. The opening statement of the plan asserts that the overarching goal is “to bring to life a new heart for our city - a legacy for future generations that can inspire a physical and philosophical relationship between citizens and their government” (Seattle Municipal Civic Center Master Plan 1999).



The plan quite literally called for a civic heart.
Source: GGLO + Triad Seattle Civic Square Proposal.

The Master Plan outlines several goals for the development. The foremost of these being that the Civic Center is expected to enliven the downtown area and create a “civic heart” for the city. To the City this means it must perform the following functions:

- Knit together the individual buildings of the Civic Center into a cohesive whole.
- Accommodate multiple functions including large public events...performances, gatherings, and celebrations.
- Communicate the symbolic importance of this place.
- Provide opportunities for elected officials, city employees, etc to meet informally and brush shoulders with the public.
- Provide open space for use by the substantial employment populations in the area.
- Make bold statements that make a strong impression and are appropriate but...balances with elements that provide complexity and intimacy.
- Accommodate human service activities but balance with other desired uses.
- Enhance the function of the Civic Center by defining its ‘center’.
- Increase accessibility.

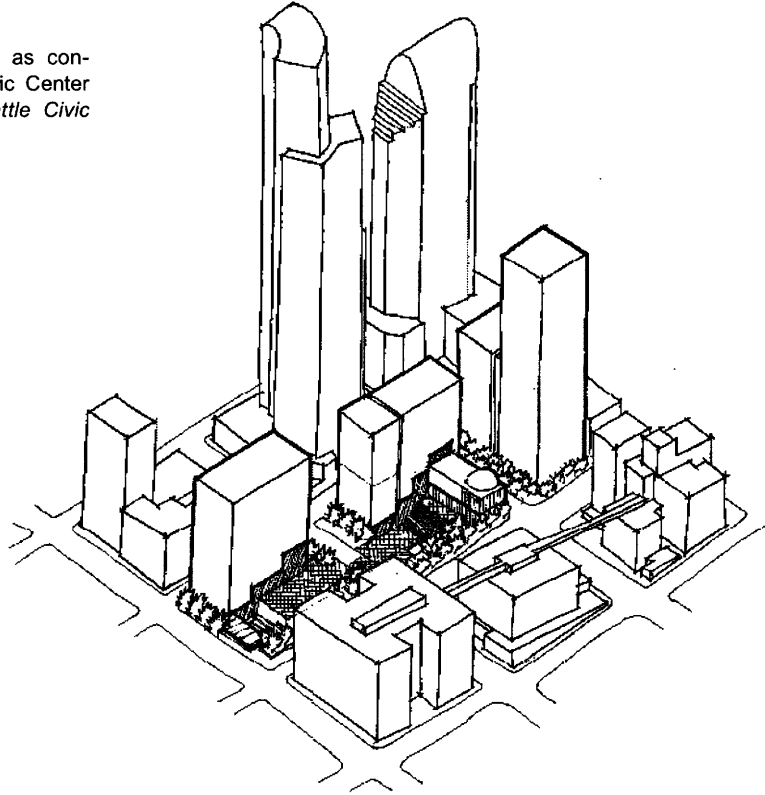
(Paraphrased from the Seattle Civic Center Master Plan 1999)

The plan prioritizes open space as a way to achieve this aim and states this very clearly:

“The Civic Center is primarily about public life...the plan must emphasize the citizenry and access to government over bureaucratic function... In all decisions regarding the design of the Civic Center, public space should be the highest priority” (Seattle Civic Center Master Plan 1999, Section 1).

In designing the two blocks that would make up the “heart” of the Civic Center, it was decided that the Public Safety Building would be rebuilt elsewhere in the city where it would make more sense as a relief shelter in case of emergency, and the block it had occupied would become primarily open space. The City Hall would be rebuilt on the Municipal Building site, with a plaza as well, and these two plazas would link visually across 4th Street to create the feeling of one, larger, continuous open space.

The massing for the site as conceived by the Seattle Civic Center Master Plan Source: Seattle Civic Center Master Plan 1999.



The zoning of the City Hall site allows upwards of 170,000 gross square feet, which supported the anticipated program for City Hall, while still allowing about a quarter of the block to be used for open space (City of Seattle City Hall Draft Space Program 1999). The zoning for the Public Safety Building allows 350 foot heights for commercial development or 400 foot heights for residential development. The plan indicated that this block should be the home of the larger plaza that will take up 66% of the site to become the Civic Square.

While the plan was proscriptive in the amount of open space to be reserved, the City wanted to be realistic about the difference between enough open space and too much open space;

“While all agree on the importance of open space, there is concern about striking the right balance between providing open space and creating the right conditions for ensuring its active use. The overall amount of open space, and the size and configuration of open space areas, should reflect the types of activity and overall intensity of development accommodated on the Civic Center sites. Providing too much space or the wrong type of space without sufficient activity to enliven it will deaden the complex” (Open Space Program, Seattle Municipal Civic Center Master Plan 1999).

The plan also implies that the City of Seattle has not been incredibly successful in maintaining its open spaces, and that it would be desirable to have other uses on the site in order to pay for maintenance of the site, and remove some of the burden from the City;

“The space should not be designed to minimize maintenance; instead, the care of the space should be highly visible. Showcasing flowering plants that are changed on a regular basis is one way in which the care of the space is made visible. The presence of maintenance workers also helps with the perception of the space as cared for and safe” (Master Plan Design Guidelines Seattle Municipal Civic Center Master Plan 1999).

The combination of the need to show a high level of maintenance and the need for activation led to the decision to allow private development on the remaining third of the site to put “eyes on the plaza” and help pay for its maintenance.

The New City Hall Plaza

The new City Hall building was designed and built around the same time that a new Frank Gehry building was being built in Seattle Center, and a new Rem Koolhaas library was being built downtown. These two projects were the focus of substantial media coverage, and effectively dampened the public’s attention to the new City Hall. In fact, the library project was so high profile that Seattle had a hard time getting architects to respond to the Request for Proposals (RFP) on the building because so many architects were busy working on the library bid (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 4/3/1999).

The design for the building seemed uncontroversial compared to the other two buildings, and was generally met with acceptance (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 4/3/1999). The only buzz that really hit the media was the \$35,000 that Mayor Paul Schell spent on a Japanese maple for the plaza, and wanted to be reimbursed for. Other than that and a few increases in funding to pay for construction, there was not much stir about the City Hall.

In reality, however, there was one mistake that was not talked about much in the media, but ended up being a major damaging feature to the design of the plaza. The large, red glass wall that was constructed between the lower plaza and the upper plaza as an art installation was created out of the city’s public art program, and designed to look like a sunset when lit up. Behind the wall were supposed to be three retail spaces for food and beverage stores. But the wall, while visually stunning, blocks the ability of a pedestrian to see into the space.

This is a major barrier for businesses who want transparency on the street. As a result, only one business has located in the space, and it was contingent upon a redesign of the corner that they occupy, so that they would have the visibility they need. The red wall has effectively squashed the life they were hoping to create on this portion of the plaza through retail.

The City has ostensibly learned from these mistakes, and now the emphasis has been shifted to the Civic Square development on the second block to provide the life that the City was hoping to create throughout the entire open space. This has placed even more demand on that plaza to perform as a “civic heart” for the city and to achieve the City’s goals of activating the downtown and knitting together the surrounding neighborhoods on its own.

The Civic Square

Once the City Hall was complete, attention shifted to the Civic Square development that, once finished, would be the last piece of the Civic Center. However, before the RFP on the project was released, it was realized that 33% of one city block (about 18,400 square feet) was not a large enough area of land for the development of full zoning buildout to a height of 350’ for office buildings, or 400’ for residential buildings. The City realized that it might be difficult to find a developer to develop such a restricted site.

The City contracted a financial consultant to determine the appropriate amount of the parcel to develop and this was then discussed at a meeting with the Mayor, City Council, City

The red wall was added as a public art installation, but has effectively removed the possibility for retail on the plaza as planned. *Photo: Kristen hall*



Planning, and Fleets and Facilities administrators. The size that was ultimately chosen was 55% of the block for development, leaving 45% of the block for public open space. While the previous number of 66% had been chosen through a public process, the smaller percentage had been arrived at without any public input.

A Request for Proposals (RFP) received five responses from developer/architect teams, and the combination of Triad Developers and GGLO Architects (both locally based firms) was chosen. Their proposal was perhaps the boldest in that they used the hillside to the most advantage with a series of terraces going up the hill, which was a deviation from the Master Plan that had envisioned the space as a flat plaza with a sharp drop to the street on the downhill side. The proposal also included a strong retail component on the 45% of open space which was not part of the Master Plan. This was added to pay for the maintenance and programming of the square, and sharply reduced the area of the open space to what the developer and architects considered a more manageable size.

Mayor Greg Nickels was attracted to the idea of placing retail on the site as an activator, but there was some disagreement within the City over this use. The City had wanted to take advantage of this open block for new open space downtown, but the proposal had chosen to minimize the amount of open space to little more than half of the 45% of the block reserved for open space.

Several people on the advisory committee felt as though this would be giving away too much; specifically Council President Jan Drago and Councilman Peter Steinbrueck. Steinbrueck commented that "It is a complete abandonment of the long-standing vision that many of us have worked on for many years," and the two vowed to fight any reduction of the open space or any effort to sell the public land to private interests (Seattle Times 4/20/2005).

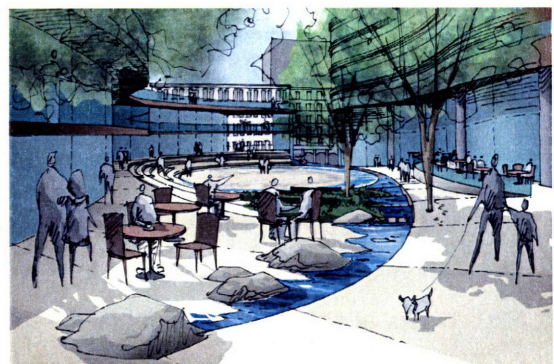
GGLO and Triad pushed back with the argument that the cost associated with the level of maintenance required by the City for this land would not be feasible without the subsidy of the retail operations. They also argued that if the City really wanted a "civic heart" they would have to program the space enough to draw people downtown to the area. It was clear to the designers that an "if you build it they will come" mentality would simply not work in this area of town that was deserted after 5pm, save for its large homeless population. After looking at various places at home and abroad, they felt that a food and beverage program would be the strongest activator for the area, without compromising the publicness of the space.

Perhaps the City was attempting to make up for the failure of the City Hall's plaza to bring any retail to the area, or perhaps they were trying to make the development as attractive to developers as possible. Either way, the motion was put to vote, and the reduction in the size of the square through the addition of retail passed.

The City allowed a few major financial concessions from the original Master Plan as well. The first of these was the agreement to not lease the land to the developer, but instead to go to a fee-simple arrangement. The developer would take possession of their 55% of the block, as well as the parking lot below grade. The ground floor level and the retail would be treated more like a design-build project, and the City would take possession upon delivery of the final product, although the developer would continue to manage and program the square and retail. This agreement ensured that the square would remain a publicly-owned space, but it would be paid for and managed by a private entity.

Upon entering into an agreement with the developers, the City became less involved in the design process, and the majority of the design decisions were taken over by GGLO and their partners Fosters + Partners and Dreitseitel Landscape Architects. GGLO had chosen this London-based architecture firm and German-based landscape architecture firm specifically for their experience in designing developments with major public open space elements in Europe, and relied on their experience to achieve their main design goal: to successfully activate the space.

After deciding that the best magnet for the square would be food and drink, the final design evolved through a number of stages, starting with a large restaurant, and moving to smaller and smaller-scale shops. It has now been decided that there will be very small storefronts that will be filled by local Seattle food and beverage companies, and the smaller floorplan of each shop will serve to ensure that chain stores who demand larger spaces cannot be accommodated. Added to the storefronts will be a group of vendors, who may rent out carts by the day to allow for flexible programming.



Renderings showing the plan to activate the space through retail. Source: *Seattle Civic Square Design Update*, March 2008.

CHALLENGES TO SUCCESS

The Civic Square has many demands placed on it. As Steinbruek put it, “The success of that public civic space...will make or break this project.” Because the space in front of the City Hall has failed to produce the kind of civic environment they were hoping it would, the emphasis has shifted to the this space to produce the vibrancy that they were hoping for the whole contiguous open space. However, there are many challenges that must be overcome if this square is to succeed in becoming a “civic heart.”

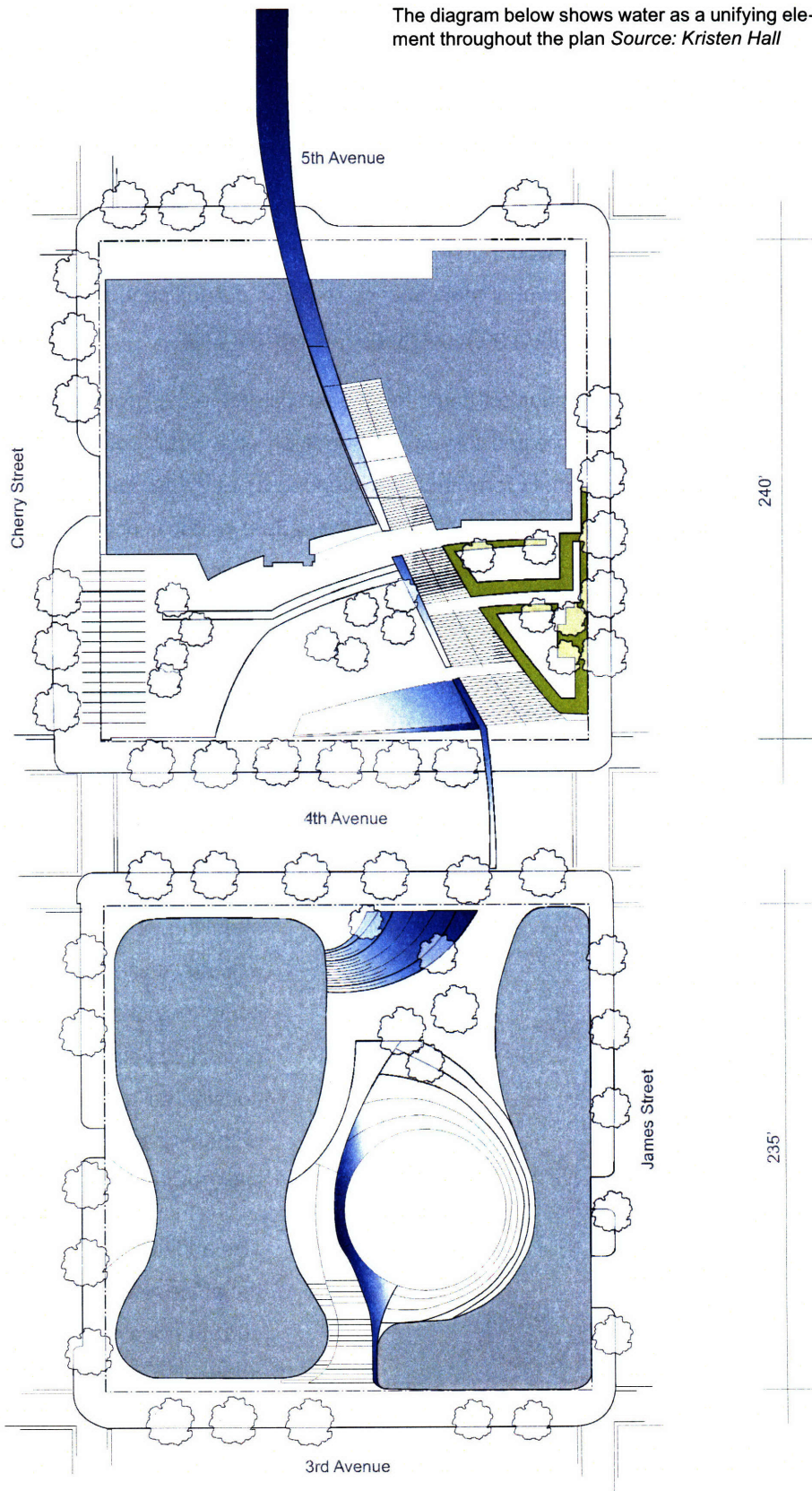
The first challenge of the space is the steep hillside, which rises 70 feet in elevation over the course of the two city blocks. The plaza directly in front of City Hall addresses this by terracing the space, to have one plaza below with fountains and benches and a sprinkling of trees, and a plaza above with tables and chairs and some trellises. However, this composition has separated the two plazas from each other and made a discontinuous space. Canady feels that the Civic Square must be a continuous space that is articulated so that the distinctions between spaces are still easily accessible, without having to climb a lot of stairs in between.

Another challenge is the ability of the space to become a “civic heart” for the city. In my interviews with Sean Canady and Guillermo Romano, there were two places that were specifically mentioned as important counterpoints in the public realm. These were the Westlake Plaza and the Seattle Center. Westlake Plaza was the site of the infamous “Battle of Seattle” WTO protests, as well as many other less extreme protests. Canady pointed out that since the WTO protests, trees have been installed in the plaza, and he noticed that the protests have shifted to the steps of the Federal Building instead.

Seattle Center, in contrast, seems to be the locus for “sacred” events to take place. There have never been protests here, and this is where everyone gathered, for example, in honor of those who died in the September 11 terrorist attacks, and when Kurt Cobain of the Seattle-based grunge band Nirvana died. This is the space people go to when there is an outpouring of community spirit. The whole place has somewhat of a Disneyland-ish feeling about it, and many families with young kids go there (Canady Interview 3/6/2008).

We can take from the Westlake Plaza example that the trees in the plaza have possibly had some effect on its ability to serve as a protest space. But the Seattle Center example gets at something else more essential to the nature of a “civic heart,” which is the way citizens will adopt a space for some symbolic purpose. Why that is, neither Canady nor Romano were certain, but they both felt that the new Civic Center should try to harness this element of the sacred.

The diagram below shows water as a unifying element throughout the plan *Source: Kristen Hall*



ANALYSIS

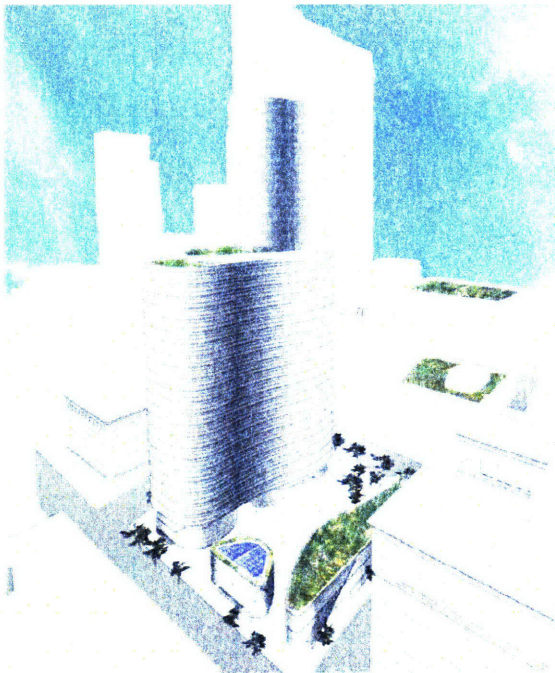
Public vs. Private

The tension that emerged most clearly in the process was the privatization of the square, which directly affects its size. This is because one of the goals was to activate the space, rather than let it sit as a wide open wasteland, and to do this through retail rather than office or residences which would only serve to minimally activate the space. Another goal of demonstrating a high level of maintenance required a significant amount of investment, which could be supplied through a public-private partnership.

Of course, the retail component could have been placed in the ground floor of the office tower, but instead was created through the addition of another building to surround the space. It is quite clear in its form that it is intended to 'hug' the space, as both buildings have concave openings toward the middle of the square (which is actually a circle), around the central focus of the amphitheater. This is a deliberate attempt on the part of the designers to make a very direct connection between the ground level uses and the square itself.

The architects say that 2-3,000 people would be able to fit in this space, and look to places like the Pike Place market where people cram in for events, spilling out in every direction,

which makes an intense sense of intimacy during these times, according to Canady. This deliberate shrinking of the square to a more intimate scale surrounded by uses could be considered a privatization of public space, but it could also be considered a smart move in a part of the city that has little activity after work hours.



The building massing on the Civic Square adds residential, office, and retail uses to the life of the plaza. *Source: Seattle Civic Square Response to EDG-2 Comments, November 2007*

The addition of residential units into the office tower is a bold move in the current housing market, but Triad is depending on increasing market demand in the urban center. Currently there is very little housing in downtown Seattle, but baby-boomers and

young professionals are eager to move in, according to Brett Allen, Director of Business Development for Triad (Allen Interview 3/6/2008). He is optimistic that despite a lack of services like grocery stores and other neighborhood amenities, people will locate in this area, and that the square with its retail will be a major incentive. He also hopes the residences will enliven the square during the evening hours, when this part of town largely shuts down, providing “eyes on the street” and enhancing security.

Allen’s reference to Jane Jacobs’ idea of “eyes on the street” here is perhaps misplaced, as she was talking about an active neighborhood of people whose apartments are closer to the street level, and an urban form which provides many entrances and exits for residents onto the street. The tower will have at most two access points to the square for residents to use, and the first residential unit is on the 35th floor of the tower, encouraging eyes on the horizon more than the street. But certainly added residential development downtown will not worsen the situation.

Creating a Campus

Two goals of the Master Plan are to knit together the surrounding neighborhoods and to create a defined center of this civic space. This is a complicated task, as making the civic center feel like its own campus seems antithetical to knitting a neighborhood together.

The plan refers to the neighborhoods of Pioneer Square to the west, which is a hip area with young shops but lots of homeless people. Directly to the west and south of the Civic Center are the County’s facilities, which can generally be considered dilapidated and untended to – this is also the location of the City Hall Park that is home to many homeless, and human services pepper the area. Further to the south is the edge of the International neighborhood, which is itself suffering from disinvestment. To the east is the major freeway, I-5, which has one of its main connectors on James St, the street that runs between the City Hall and the County buildings. Finally, to the North is the Central Business District that becomes quiet after 5pm (Romano Interview 3/7/2008).

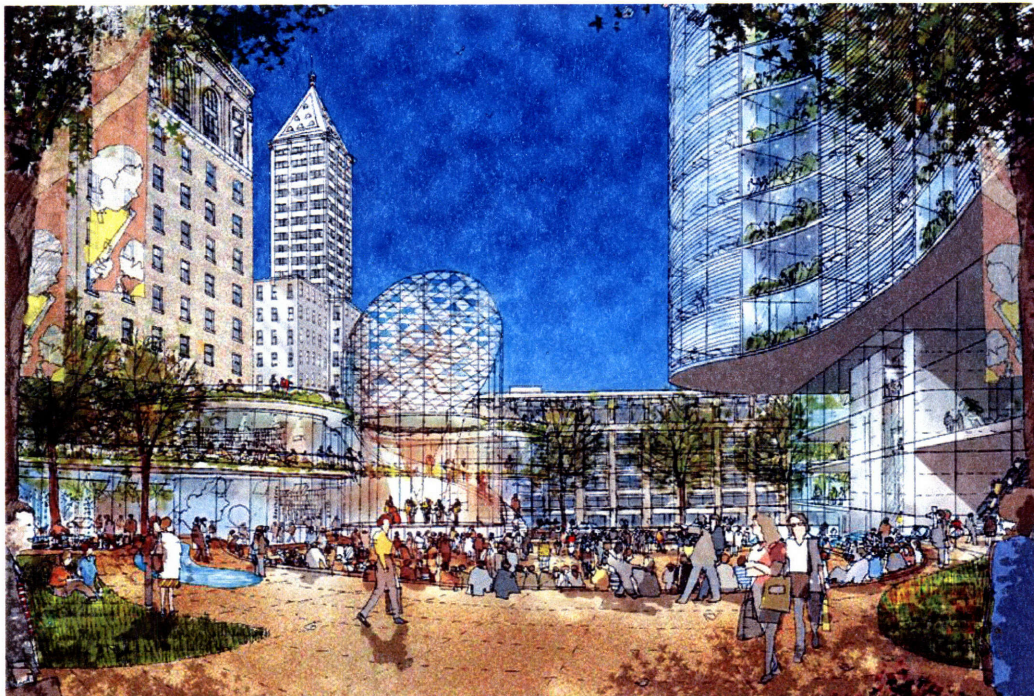
Additionally there are powerful physical barriers acting here, including the freeway and the steep hill. If we believe Chidister that spatial segregation gives “fuller spatial expression” to our “deep-set divisions”, we can see that it will be very difficult to knit these neighborhoods together with this development, as perhaps the reason they are not currently intermingled is a social one, not a spatial one. That being said, a civic center that is open to all, because of its homogenous nature (as compared to a corporate plaza, for example) might be a much better type of open space to knit these two together.

Activation

The retail component focusing on local food and drink stores has already been discussed, but the civic activation of the plaza and the square was also an important consideration in the design of the space – particularly in the deliberate choice of the amphitheater in the square.

The Civic Square project has been heavily influenced by the Broadgate project in London, designed by Fosters + Partners. Broadgate is a retail space that rings a circular plaza, creating an amphitheater which acts as a kind of stage. The design team has used this example as a model of how they want to create many entrances onto the square's amphitheater space, and wrap the space with retail.

In the first drawings, there had been a “People’s Pavilion,” a large, glass object protruding from the center of the square, which would act as a focal point and would be available to be rented out for performances and lectures. Canady explained that the pavilion was later scrapped in favor of an amphitheater explicitly because the pavilion seemed like too much of a focal point, and would not support the ad hoc spirit of interaction that the team was trying to create. They felt that an amphitheater would allow people to become performers and audience spontaneously, and would also support street performers and other free events.



The design team decided not to include the People’s Pavilion at center of this image, because it did not make the right civic gesture. *Source: Seattle Civic Square Design Update March 2008*

Furthermore, the People's Pavilion was undefined in terms of its use, which Canady differentiates from flexibility. The pavilion would need to be managed and rented out, which may be flexible, but this is management heavy, and not spontaneous. They felt it would not generate enough revenue, or give people enough reason to be there. They needed a planned activity, something to buy, and felt that food and drink bring people together more than anything else.

Beyond functionality, Canady explained "the People's Pavilion was a civic gesture. It's iconic, it's emblematic; something you see that burns an imprint in your memory. You would always go back to it." After thinking and talking about it for so long, they moved away from it, because it detracted from the interaction between the surrounding spaces and the central space. "As a civic gesture it was a strong gesture, but as a way to draw people to it, it wasn't so civic. The most civic character would be in the openness of the uses below, [the square should be] about people using it and not the grand civic statement" (Canady Interview 3/6/2008). The designers wanted it to be about the interaction between people themselves, not between people and objects. For them, the amphitheater that is at the center of the development was more of a backdrop that celebrates the theater of life, rather than formalizing it.

Sunlight

The east-west orientation of the site was fortunate, in that it allowed planners to designate southern portions of the two blocks for maximum sunlight and still have the open spaces all line up with each other. Because the climate in Seattle is so frequently overcast, the spaces needed to be oriented so as to take advantage of whatever sunlight there might be. The fact that the open space spills over two blocks might have made it difficult to have this contiguous arrangement had they not been oriented east-to-west.

Water

The city of Seattle is surrounded by water. Kathryn Gustafson, the landscape architect for the plaza attached to City Hall said at a presentation for her design "You can always see outside Seattle, the water and the mountains. No matter where you are, you're always connected to the water" (Seattle Post-Intelligencer 5/15/2000). And in fact, water is a unifying element throughout the design of the open space.

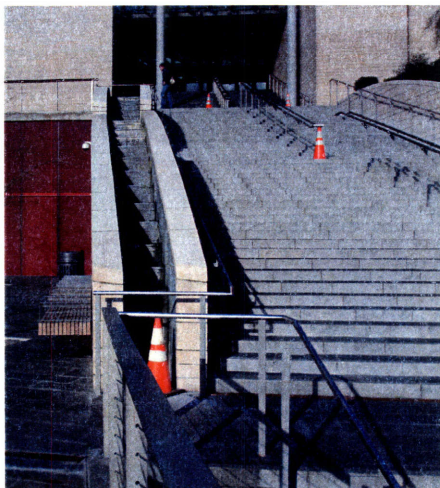
Gustafson created an important connection between the two open spaces with the addition of the water, as it flows down the hill, starting at the Seattle Justice Center, picks up



Water is an important link between the two separate plazas. *Photo: Kristen Hall*



The steps at City Hall are awkward for walking or sitting. *Photo: Kristen Hall*



again across the street, and literally flows through City Hall, down the front steps and ends in a cascade where the plaza rises away from the street. Water jets that are embedded in the plaza send water shooting 6 feet in the air, landing in a large pool that is created on the undifferentiated surface of the plaza. This cascade will in turn be visually connected with the square across the street with another large fountain and yet another cascade flowing through the block to the bottom, where it will end in a water wall.

Wind

The design has not only been affected by sun angles, but by wind velocity as well. After an analysis of an alternative with the retail along Third Street being broken up a bit to allow pedestrian access, it was decided that the corner of Third and James should actually not be open, as this is the corner that would receive the highest velocity winds onto the Civic Square to create a wind tunnel.

It is interesting that this was taken into consideration for the Civic Square development and seemingly not the City Hall Plaza, which does not mitigate this effect. This is perhaps an example where the sun angles and the wind angles called for different treatments, and the sun angles won out. I experienced this most strongly on the upper portion of the plaza, which is essentially thrust out into the wind with no element of enclosure or protection.

Stairs

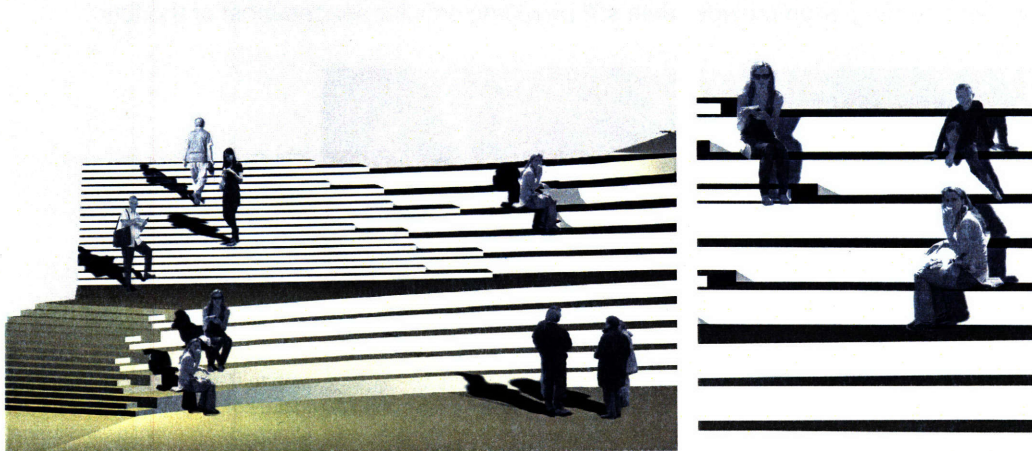
The geometry of the stairway coming down from City Hall, as Canady points out, is a bit awkward. This is something I observed while in the plaza, watching a group of elderly tourists try to descend the stairs while

holding onto the rail, which are placed at a tricky angle to each other. Aside from their awkward angle, the rise and run of the steps are a strange relationship which makes for many short steps as one climbs.

It is inevitable that the stairs would be long, as the hill rises so steeply, however there was talk about a hillclimb assist in the plan that was never followed through with. This would have been an escalator or some other mechanical device to help people to get up to the front steps. This idea was scrapped primarily because of cost, but also because of the focus on sustainability for the building. To supply handicap accessibility there is a direct connection onto the lower plaza (at grade) which then leads to the elevators behind the red, glass wall.

The design team for the Civic Square has focused a lot of attention on the awkward stair configuration of City Hall. Being that steps can be an obstacle to entry into any space, Dreiseitl set out to find the optimal arrangement of steps for eating, sitting, talking to someone else, and walking up or down. They built model steps and filmed people interacting on them, so as to choose which type of step was the most usable configuration.

The sweeping geometry of the City Hall stairway was designed in the original plans, which were to have a stairway curving down from City Hall that deposited the pedestrians at the corner to cross at the crosswalk to the Civic Square. This worked well before retail was planned for this corner, but now the geometry of the building on the corner does not allow visual access into the square. This was a concern the City raised with the design team, which has responded by making that corner of the building transparent. It is unclear whether this will be a strong enough intervention to invite pedestrians into the square.



The design team responded to the awkward steps at the City Hall Plaza by investigating more appropriate stair configurations. Source: *Seattle Civic Square Design Update March 2008*

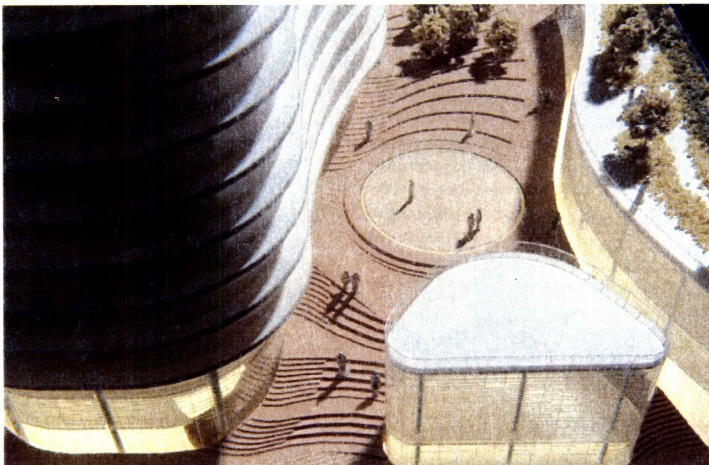
Edges

One of the potential strengths of the Civic Square portion of the open space is that it is located directly uphill of a major transit node. Third Street, between James Street and Cherry Street is not only a major bus stop; it is also a stop on the light rail that is currently under construction throughout Seattle. It is estimated that this bus stop currently brings 10,000 people or so to the area every day, and with the light rail stop, the City anticipates this will increase tremendously (Seattle Civic Center Master Plan 1999).

They are hoping to catch the work crowd coming from the CBD as they migrate toward the bus and light rail after work. If this population can be leveraged with programming and food, the designers hope to keep people in the area until at least seven o'clock in the evening or so. Of course, this will only work if the plaza is successful.

The design team is currently refining the connections between the light rail station and the Civic Square. Because the tower and the retail development will line this street, the entry-way into the square must be designed correctly so as to add prominence to the entrance and draw people up the steps. They are hoping to achieve this with a water wall, which will be somewhat transparent and allow visibility into the square, as well as directing the attention upwards toward the Civic Square and City Hall.

The connection between City Hall's plaza and the Civic Square crosses a street, and so most of the time these spaces will likely be seen as separate, rather than contiguous as they are described in the plan. However, a major advantage of this compartmentalization of space is that when there are large events, the City can close Fourth Street to traffic, and allow pedestrians to use both spaces. This allows the open space to be more flexible in accommodating large crowds while still providing smaller spaces most of the time.



One of the original configurations for the entry from the light rail stop to the square. The passage to the bottom right has since been changed to prevent a wind tunnel. Source: *Seattle Civic Square Response to EDG-2 Comments, November 2007*

Hardscape vs. Landscape

From the beginning, the design team also knew that the square had to be largely hardscape to accommodate the food traffic, and provide plenty of seating for the eating establishments. Yet, there was still a feeling from the public that the space should be a park or some kind of urban oasis. (KOMOTV 8/31/2006) Canady's example of the trees in Westlake Plaza which have served to move protests out of this space brings up an interesting point. In his own words, "All of the trees might be pretty, but they aren't civic."

Trees, as architectural features, act to close off areas and obscure sight lines. If the City Hall is to be a powerful symbol of government, it would follow that the views to the building from the Civic Square should be preserved. If the plaza were to be full of trees, the plaza and the square would lose their strongest element of connectivity, which is through their visual connection.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I did not observe much activity on the plaza while I was there, except at lunch time on weekdays when there was always a handful of people eating lunch, having a cigarette, or talking on their cell phones. Most of the people that I observed appeared to come from the City Hall offices, but there were a few people who came from the street to photograph the building as well.

The most dramatic effect on the plaza were the water jets that seemed to activate the space even when no one was there, with their white noise, and their height, which is about that of a person. They were also popular with a group of children that I observed playing on the plaza. In a conversation with a security guard on the plaza one evening, he told me that these fountains are particularly popular with kids on hot days.

Another interesting thing to note was that from my perch on the upper tier of the plaza, I was able to watch much of what was going on around the plaza, but everyone else on the plaza seemed acutely aware of my gaze. This was especially true of people who sat on the bench in the middle of the lower part, who seemed to always be looking back up at me as I took notes. I do not know to what this can be attributed – if they felt uncomfortable or something else, but it was interesting to note that they were aware of my presence above them.

The bagel shop in the lower plaza did seem to help activate the space. I observed people buying food there and taking it out onto the plaza to eat. Had the other stores been located

in the rest of the planned retail space, I could see how this would have further activated the plaza.

This question of privatization makes for an interesting conundrum. The presence of retail activities would conceivably bring more people to the area, especially during lunch time. However, it would have a questionable outcome for the goal that the Civic Center Master Plan outlines of balancing human services with activation. Homeless people would most likely not feel as welcome in this area if it were activated through commercial activity. However, as it stands, I never observed a homeless person in the City Hall Plaza.

The civic intention of the City Hall Plaza has been unsuccessful, as the City defines it – their definition of civic being a large amount of people in one open space (Romano Interview 3/7/2008). It seems that the City is chasing their idea of 'civic,' trying to learn from their mistakes, and achieve their goal in the development of the Civic Square.

Certainly the designers of the new Civic Square are attempting to engage the public in a civic way, with the removal of the People's Pavilion and the enhancement of the amphitheater. They are hoping the combination of bringing people to shop and providing a civic arena will support a naturally civic life that is supposed to take place there.

Another aspect of this civic life they are trying to capture is the element of the sacred that Canady so elegantly described with the contrast of Westlake Plaza, the site of protest, and Seattle Center, the site of ceremonies. By bringing in water, highlighting the hillside, and enhancing views to Elliot Bay, the whole complex hopes to achieve a connection with nature. While city government changes frequently, nature is constant – this is the stability the design hopes to evoke.

CHAPTER 5

Boston City Hall Plaza

Boston's City Hall Plaza has been at the center of controversy since before it was even built. It started out as the centerpiece in a massive urban renewal project that displaced hundreds to build a Government Center, and the City Hall was almost immediately named one of the ten best buildings in the US. Thirty years later the plaza appears as number one on a different list: "The 16 Squares Most Dramatically in Need of Improvement." (Project for Public Spaces 2005).

As if this were not enough, the current debate rages over whether to declare the City Hall a historic landmark or demolish the building and plaza and start over in South Boston.

OPEN SPACE CONTEXT

Boston is the only city in the United States that can boast a truly organic form that evolved much the way European centers did, before the car. (Dennis, 4/24/2008) Part of this form is Boston's Common, an idea upon which many New England towns were based, which preserved a part of the land at the center of the town for common use by all citizens. This space was the first of its kind in the US, and has been a center of civic life since it was created (Boston Parks and Recreation Commission 1990).

Next door to the Common, Boston enjoys the Public Garden, which is maintained by a private entity, but open to the public. The combination of the Public Garden and Boston Common combine to create the largest "jewel" at the end of Frederick Law Olmstead's "Emerald Necklace," a system of parks connected throughout the city.

Two public squares in Boston stand out as models in public space development. These are Post Office Square and Copley Square, which were often referred to in my interviews and readings on Boston as examples of successful public spaces. Post Office Square is a public-private partnership with a parking garage below and a park above. The revenue

from the parking garage goes toward the maintenance and programming of the square, as do those from the café kiosk located in the center of the plaza. The high level of maintenance combined with food service on the plaza help to activate this downtown plaza during the week, when it is largely populated by office workers (Project for Public Spaces 2008).

Copley Square was redesigned from an unpopular, sunken plaza in 1989, to the heavily used public space it is today. The square sits in front of the historic Trinity Church and at the foot of the Hancock Tower, facing the Boston Public Library across the street. The square features a fountain which is especially popular with the lunchtime crowd, and has a large green in its center. It hosts a farmers market in the warmer months, as well as public performances.

Near Government Center sit Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market, popular tourist destinations for Boston. Revived from old warehouses on the waterfront, Quincy Market at one point commanded the highest rent per square foot of any other commercial space in the US. (McKinneil 4/24/2008). Just north of this is Boston's most recent major open space project, the Rose Kennedy Greenway. The Greenway has only recently emerged as a result of burying I-93 which used to run through this space above-grade, effectively cutting the waterfront off from the rest of the city. Now the Greenway promotes access to the waterfront and the North End neighborhood, as well as providing an ample open space amenity.

BACKGROUND

I had the pleasure of attending the Boston City Hall: 50 Years Symposium, featuring Michael McKinneil and Jack Meyer, two of the architects that worked on the original design and plan (respectively) for the plaza. Much of the information below was derived from this informative symposium.

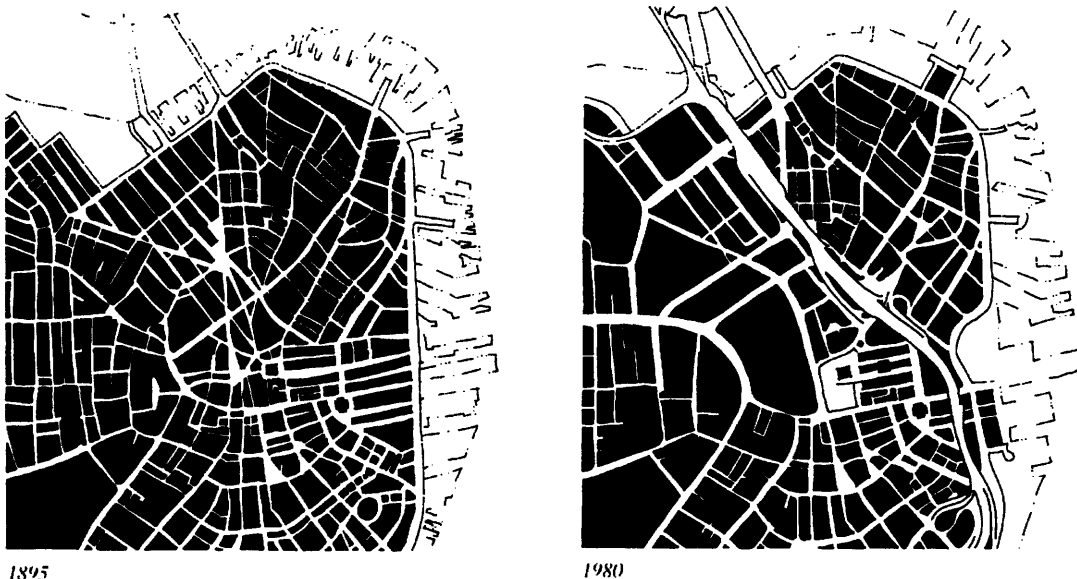
The site that Government Center currently occupies had formerly been a bustling district of tenements called Scollay Square. It was much like the nearby North End in its built form, and remnants of the area's history can be found in the few groups of buildings that remain from this time, including the Sears Crescent Buildings that form the southeastern edge of the plaza and the Blackstone Block to the northeast.

Scollay Square housed many important moments in America's history, as can be said about much of Boston. The most notable is the invention of the telephone on this site by Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Watson. A statue marking the event can be found outside the Federal Building.

Despite the area's one-time importance for the social elite of Boston, the area had transitioned to a marginalized neighborhood. In the early 1900's the upper class that had once lived here had moved out to more stylish neighborhoods in the nearby Beacon Hill and Back Bay. By the 1950s, according to the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the area was considered "one of the most blighted in the central city marked by dilapidated dwellings and vacant stores, open parking lots, broken neon lights and faded marquees, taverns and tattoo parlors" (BRA 1964, 2).

As was happening in many major American cities in the 1950's and 60's, Boston was undergoing a period of disinvestment in the downtown due to suburban growth. The passage of the Housing Act in 1949 allocated a considerable amount of federal dollars for cities to reinvest in their downtowns (O'Brien 1982). This policy led to a planning device called Urban Renewal, which was conceived as a method of creating economic growth in the downtown based on the idea of tearing down "slum" housing that was deemed overcrowded and unhealthy, and rebuilding large federally-sponsored projects.

One story, which is perhaps apocryphal, describes the political landscape of the time well (McKinnel 4/24/2008). There were rumors in the late 1950's that the John Hancock Company might be moving out of Boston, headed for the suburbs because of the intense racial and economic tensions exploding in Boston at the time, particularly in response to busing.



Allan Jacobs' diagrams of Boston's downtown in 1895 and in 1980, after Government Center and the freeway changed the form of the downtown. *Source: Jacobs, 1993*

A city official caught wind of this, and told the mayor at the time that the only way they could get the big insurance company to stay in Boston was to make as large and explicit a gesture as possible to demonstrate the City's commitment to economic growth. In his view, the best way to do that was to forget about old political habits of getting money from the federal government and spending in small pieces all over the city to appease political supporters. Instead, the city should put it all into one grand development for City government. According to the story, this was the birth of the idea for Government Center.

The City also needed a new City Hall as the historic one had become too small, and there was a need for offices for the federal government. Scollay Square became the target location for this development due to its location just a few blocks from the former City Hall building, close to the freeway, at the foot of posh Beacon Hill, and adjacent to the Central Business District. Furthermore, the City could use urban renewal dollars from the federal government to clear out this "blighted" area and start fresh.

The Plan for Government Center

The powerful ideology of urban renewal had a great effect on the plans for Government Center. Part of this ideology was to sweep out the old, irrational built form and build new, logical systems. To paraphrase the quote of one bureaucrat of the time; 'Boston did not share with London the advantages of having the old parts of the city bombed out' (paraphrased from Dennis 4/24/2008). The dilapidated buildings and the historic, narrow streets were seen as a burden impeding the growth of the city.

New development was rooted in rational systems of movement that were often made most convenient for automobile traffic, and thus focused on straightening and widening streets and removing "obsolete" infrastructure. They were also rationalized in terms of their use, and often created single-use districts and super-blocks (Jacobs 1961). Boston's Plan for Government Center is a perfect example of these ideals.

The plan to "eliminate" Scollay Square placed great faith in the ability of urban renewal to revitalize Boston's economic base, and was quite destructive to the neighborhood towards that end (Cobb 1963). The city cleared from the area 777 businesses, 264 families and 176 individuals, and reduced the twenty-two streets in the area to just six (BRA 1964).

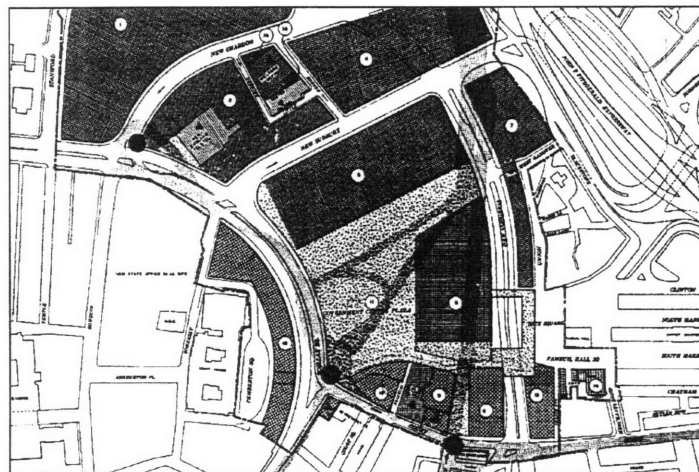
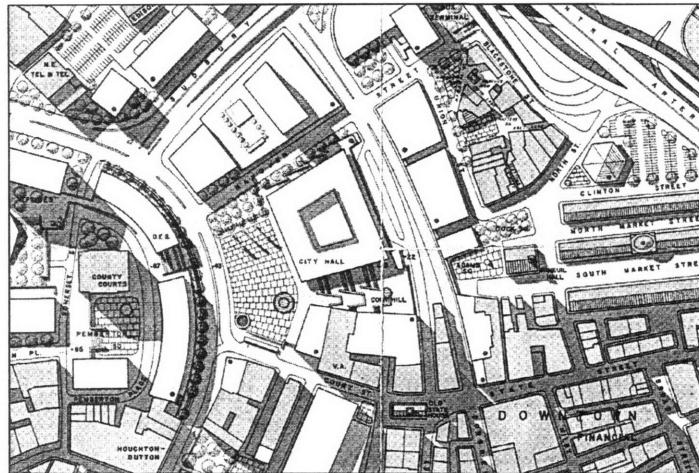
While the plan to destroy Scollay Square was incredibly destructive to the fabric of the city, Michael McKinnel explained that the plans were based in a great hope and optimism about the possibilities of good government, as espoused by John F. Kennedy, who was running for President at the time the plans were written for Government Center.

When one reads the plan for Government Center, it is clear that the intention of the project was to reinvigorate downtown Boston and demonstrate the commitment of the City to its downtown areas. As the Hancock anecdote suggests, many businesses were moving out to the suburbs and the City was suffering from lack of tax dollars as a result.

Furthermore, people saw the Old State House as representational of a government that imposed its will on people, rather than a welcoming place for citizens (The Boston Globe 1/30/1996). There was a strong feeling that the city needed to transform itself into a New Boston, and there was no better way to represent this than through a new Government Center that represented the ideals of the changing times (The Boston Globe 1/14/2007).

The new Government Center hoped to achieve the goals of:

- Revitalization of a key portion of Downtown Boston through clearance, redevelopment and rehabilitation, thereby eliminating a decadent and sub-standard area.



Top: AH&G's plan for Government Center and figure ground.

Below: Pei and Associated plan for Government Center and figure ground.

Source: Hurley, 1995.

- Functional integration of new governmental facilities, supported by new private office facilities and ancillary consumer and business service facilities.
- Introduction of new economic strength in the Government Center Project Area, thereby creating an effective center of activity functionally linked to the Retail Core, the Financial District, the Waterfront, the North Station, the Beacon Hill Governmental District, and the nearby residential areas of Beacon Hill and the West and North ends.
- Provision of adequate vehicular access to Government Center and improvement of mass transit and pedestrian access into and through the Project Area.
- Creation of design continuity between the public and private parcels in order to heighten an awareness of the essential inter-relation of all the Government Center buildings, open spaces, and pedestrian and vehicular ways.
- Creation of a symbol of democratic government and its related institutions in the physical context of the surrounding historical districts, thereby continuing and improving the important role this area has played in the political, social, and cultural history of Boston and the Nation.

(Paraphrased from Cobb 1963).

The physical plan for the new area was designed by the firm Adams, Howard & Greely, with Jack Meyer and Kevin Lynch consulting. The idea was to create an urban composition of buildings that would symbolize the importance and prominence of government, as well as creating a civic heart in the center of Boston.

From the beginning a large plaza was a focal point for the plan. Its purpose was to set off the composition of the buildings and preserve view corridors to other important landmarks in the area (Meyers 4/24/2008). More importantly, it provided a counterpoint to the history of the Common; "Where the Common typified history tradition and longevity, the new plaza would stand for rebirth, strength, and vitality," which it was hoped would make the political excitement of the time more salient in the built form (Hurley 1995).

According to Jack Meyer the formal goals of the plan were heavily focused on emphasizing the transition from Beacon Hill to Boston Harbor. They placed City Hall deliberately at the edge of the site over Congress Street, right before the drop to Faneuil Hall to symbolize "the last escarpment of Beacon Hill" jutting out over the market, visible from the freeway (Meyer 4/24/2008). There was also an idea of a "walk to the sea" which would originate at

the State House, the beginnings of Boston, and bring the pedestrian through various important moments in Boston's History, including the Sears Crescent, the new City Hall, Quincy Market, and the warehouses on Long Wharf, to finally arrive at the sea.

AH&G was later to be replaced by IM Pei and Associates with the election of the new Mayor Collins. With the switch from AH&G to Pei and Associates, the form of the plan changed but the basic ideas remained the same.

AH&G had made the City Hall a central, prominent feature of the plan that was more related to its urban surroundings such as streets, with a clear front of the building. The Pei plan isolated the City Hall in the middle of the plaza, unsupported by surrounding streets, and wanted to give the front and back of the building equal treatment (Hurley 1995).

In order to set these goals into bricks and mortar, the City held a design competition to determine the design for City Hall and its plaza. As the City Hall was supposed to represent of a new way of doing things, a design competition was a symbolic beginning, as design competitions were not at that time common practice in the US (Millard 1970). The combination of Kallman, McKinnel, and Knowels, three Columbia University professors, won the competition with their beton brut ("raw cement" in English) building and their plaza of red brick.

The design submitted by the group was by far the most progressive, different plan of all the entries (Dennis 4/24/2008). The City felt that this form best represented the aims that they were hoping to achieve as a government with the mass of the offices pulled up and away from the plaza to give the feeling of the plaza flowing into the building. The designers did not depart at all from the plan for the plaza, save for their enlargement of the City Hall building.



Boston's City Hall. Photo: Kristen Hall

Reactions to City Hall and its Plaza

While there were many architects that praised the development, there were many citizens who did not like it, and this disagreement has continued to be the case since the building was built. In 1976, a poll of architects and historians by the American Institute of Architects voted the building the sixth most important building in the History of America (The Boston Globe 5/3/1992). However, the building has also been criticized by its users for being confusing, labyrinthine, full of dark corners and wasted space, and generally unfriendly (The Boston Globe 10/13/2004). While the building has both its critics and its supporters, there have been very few supporters of the plaza in its current configuration.

The present Mayor Menino has blasted the plaza, calling it a “wasteland” that is barren and windswept (The Boston Globe 10/7/1994). There have been numerous articles in the Boston Globe about the failure of the plaza; one editorial in the Boston Globe captures well the deep dislike of the plaza:

“If you wish to know firsthand why people emigrated to America from Russia or northern Europe, you should take a walk across Boston’s City Hall Plaza on a cold and windy day, preferably after a snowfall.

“Let the winds that blast across this tundra they call a plaza push you faster than you wish to go across the patches of ice that cling stubbornly to the bricks. You may not be alone, but the place is so vast that you will feel alone, and soon you will listen for the hoofbeats of cossacks hard on your trail.

“Or, if you want to re-create the southern climes of your ancestors, go there in the summer and join the other mad dogs and tourists as they wander about without shade, go crazily in circles and moan, ‘Water. Water.’ Listen now for the commands of the brutal legionnaire: ‘March, or die!’” (The Boston Globe, 12/17/1988)

It is impressive that the plaza has remained at the heart of this criticism for so long and yet so little has been done to change it.

Resistance to Change

There have been many events there which have tried to re-interpret the plaza, such as Italian Night, screenings of sporting events on large screens, the Big Apple Circus, and various other events, but there have only been three permanent interventions on the plaza in the past fifty years.



What was once a fountain that attracted people to come sit by it has been cemented over to become an obstacle in the vast plaza.
Photo: Kristen Hall

One of the interventions was cementing over the fountain that has caused problems and leaks since it was built (The Boston Globe 6/9/2006). Another was the addition of some information kiosks placed en route from the subway station to Faneuil Hall. The final and most significant change was the addition of the arcade along the Cambridge Street edge. While the paving over of the fountain was more of an exasperated response to a persistent problem, the arcade and information kiosk came out of a much larger effort to change the plaza.

In 1994, Mayor Menino held an Ideas Competition to generate ideas for the redesign of the plaza. The immense response to this competition showed considerable support for the idea of revitalizing the space and a report summarizing the ideas from the competition, called *Revitalizing City Hall Plaza, A Framework for Change*, outlined the five main goals for the space that emerged:

- The plaza should serve as the City's preeminent civic space.
- In revitalizing the plaza, we should create a renewed sense of place and promote vitality.
- A public/private partnership should finance the plaza's revitalization.
- The plaza must be both a destination in its own right and a key link in the city between the Common and the Waterfront.
- The plaza should be invigorated through the use of 21st century orientation and information technology.

(The Trust for City Hall Plaza, 1998).

In order to ride the wave of enthusiasm generated through the Ideas Competition and create a feasible plan for the reconstruction of the plaza, in 1995 Mayor Menino set up The Trust for City Hall Plaza (sometimes referred to as the Friends of City Hall Plaza). This task force was to prepare a plan for changes to the plaza that included a means for financing changes and long-term maintenance. They were also to lead the effort in stakeholder approvals and public participation.

The Trust worked for three years to devise a plan that would accomplish the goals set out by the Framework for Change through six refinements to the plaza, which were to (1) make it an active urban crossroads; (2) add a comfortable civic green; (3) redesign the MBTA headhouse for the Green and Blue lines; (4) create active uses along the reinstatement of the removed Hanover Street; (5) reconfigure Cornhill Terrace as a “walk to the sea”; and (6) improvements to the plaza level of City Hall (The Trust for City Hall Plaza 1998).

In its program, the plan responded to these goals primarily with the addition of a great deal of commercial space. Specifically this included the addition of a 350-room hotel, part of the original plan for Government Center in 1963, which was never built. The plan also included the reinstatement of Hanover Street that had been removed as part of the logic of urban renewal, with a block of buildings along its edge to make an important connection



The Trust for City Hall Plaza suggested a common much like the Boston Common to fill up some of the space in the plaza.
Source: *The Trust for City Hall*

back to the North End and the Rose Kennedy Greenway. The addition of these commercial uses as well as a public garage below the plaza would not only activate the plaza throughout the day and into the evening, they would also help pay for the maintenance of the plaza over the long run.

There were also a number of additions for public amenity, such as the addition of a civic green (like the Boston Common), and an indoor Winter Garden, that would also act as a headhouse to the Blue Line. Information kiosks were proposed along various routes, and much attention was paid to maximizing the

areas that are exposed to the least wind, and minimizing the impacts of wind on the areas most affected. Lastly, it was proposed that the initial improvements to the plaza be paid for by a combination of Federal, City, and private funds.

While the Trust did release the plan in 1998, their process was not easy. The design of the space was complicated by the physical constraints of a sloping plaza, subway lines running underneath, and the requirement to preserve view corridors to landmarks in the area. The process was also heavily constrained by parties involved. As mentioned, the Trust was charged with getting the approval of the public and the stakeholders, but the latter proved to be the most difficult.

The General Services Administration (GSA) is located in the Kennedy towers and low-rise that hold a prominent position along the northwestern side of the plaza and placed prohibitive restrictions along their frontage on the plaza. At one point they had forbidden any development within 100 feet of their low-rise building, and declared that anything built facing them would have to be windowless so as to protect the security of the DEA offices that were located along that side of the low-rise. As Thomas O'Brien of the BRA wrote in a memo to Robert Peck of the GSA,

"If the north face of any new development must have a blank wall facing the low-rise, that virtually rules out any possibility for development... Boston GSA staff maintain that there must be a minimum of 100 feet between the low-rise and any new structure. If Hanover Street is extended, that precludes any building on the north side of Hanover Street." (O'Brien 1999)

The memo goes on to imply that the GSA had been uncooperative and unclear on its position of what may be acceptable for development, and that the design restrictions must be made clear before designs could move forward. The memo from Robert Peck in response indicates that the GSA would be willing to work with the Trust in devising ideas for what could be built there, but still provides no clear guidance. In an interview with Kathy Donaher, former member of the Trust, it was implied that the GSA's issue was not really about security, so much as their building's prominence on the plaza.

Conflicts such as this one effectively slowed the planning process of the Trust so that it took three years before they were able to release their plan. In that time, momentum had slowed for changing the plaza and people began to feel that nothing was ever going to happen (Donaher Interview 4/11/2008). The Trust itself was supported by contributions of private entities that had a stake in the project or supported the Mayor's efforts. The Trust

began to lose funding from donors who felt it was no longer worth supporting, and reached a point where it could no longer continue. According to Donaher, the construction of the arcade designed by Alex Krieger along Cambridge Street was the last-ditch effort of the Trust before it fell apart. All serious efforts to change the Plaza faded with the collapse of the Trust.

A New Location for City Hall?

In addition to these attempts to change the design of the plaza, Mayor Menino has recently suggested that City Hall move to an entirely different location and sell the City Hall and its plaza for development by private interests. This is in part due to the fact that the Government Center has been so widely declared a failure, and in part because the property values for downtown Boston are so high at the moment that the City would be able to get a significant amount of money from the deal.

In addition to the inefficiencies of the building itself, the argument has been made that many of the City's bureaucratic functions can now be completed online, such as paying a parking ticket, for example. This means that people are no longer compelled to go to City Hall for these everyday transactions with government.

The current proposal is to move to the South Boston Waterfront, where there is currently a lack of transit, but a lot of new development. City Hall and the plaza would be put up for bid, and the new owners would have to work around the existing subway lines that run below the plaza and sort out the political situation with the GSA and other abutters.

This is not the first time Mayor Menino has made such a proposal. In 2004 there was talk of moving the City Hall to the Hynes Convention Center, which was used much less after the construction of the larger South Boston Convention Center (The Boston Globe 10/13/2004). This plan was subsequently dropped, but the idea of relocating City Hall and destroying or converting the current building remains salient.

McKinne's response to this was that if the Mayor is as supportive of sustainability as he claims to be, then he should be cognizant of how much energy it would take to tear down the existing City Hall and build a new one. In his words, "I once asked our engineer [on the City Hall project about the plans to demolish it, and] he said he'd never poured this much concrete into a building...He said don't worry about it, it would take a controlled nuclear explosion to get rid of this building" (McKinne 4/24/2008). McKinne agreed with the other panelists at the symposium that the building would probably not meet its fate any time soon.

More important than the challenges with the existing building is the fact that for many, Boston City Hall is representative of a time when government was transitioning, and there was an interest in demonstrating this in its architecture. To this contingent, this reason is enough for preservation;

“Just as Faneuil Hall shows the vigor of Colonial Boston, the State House reflects the confidence of the Federalist period, and Trinity Church typifies the elegance of the emerging Back Bay, City Hall represents a decade in which the city reinvented itself as a thriving urban center. As the mayor’s preservationist instincts ought to tell him, this is a building worth keeping.” (Boston Globe 4/9/1998)

Added to the symbolism of the development is the symbolism of the place. The place itself has a history that is tied up with the history of Boston. It is only one block from the original State House, close to the Boston Common and Public Garden, near the activity of Haymarket and Faneuil Hall, as well as the new Rose Kennedy Greenway. If, as the Ideas Competition would suggest, the public wants their City Hall and Plaza to serve as the city’s “preeminent civic space,” it must be located at the center of gravity in the city. For Boston, many would argue that the City Hall is very much in the correct place.

CHALLENGES TO SUCCESS

The biggest challenge to success, as suggested by the architects and planners of the space, were the politics at work behind the design, which severely inhibited the ability of the designers to activate the space.

The plans for Government Center refer to the Campo in Siena, which is a vibrant public piazza. In comparing the two, it would seem that the designers left out the one of the important elements in the success of the Campo, which is the retail and cafes lining the edges of the plaza. However, there was a political element of the story that later emerged at the symposium.

The architects attempted to place retail along the grade change between the Federal Building and the City Hall, and a restaurant in the basement of the City Hall itself, however, the City would not allow the architects to activate the space with any commercial uses whatsoever. After many attempts at making this happen, the architects finally found that the City’s resistance was due to a political arrangement.

In order to gain the support of local businesses for the new development, the City had agreed not to compete with the surrounding shops by building any additional retail space.

Thus, no commercial development was allowed to be built on the plaza itself, save for the Sears Crescent which already housed some retail. As far as McKinnel was concerned, this doomed the plaza from the beginning. These politics carry on through today with the issues that the GSA has created.



A side by side comparison at the same scale with the Campo in Siena, the supposed inspiration for Boston City Hall Plaza, shows little similarity in form. Source: *Live Local Maps* at local.live.com

ANALYSIS

Size

Perhaps the most criticized element of the plaza is its sheer size. It takes up nine and a half acres (eleven acres including buildings) of downtown Boston, and is clad from edge to edge in red brick. This makes for an impressive expanse in such a dense, fine-grained city as Boston. This is perhaps one of the reasons the plaza is so heavily criticized – because it is so out of character with the surrounding form of Boston.

When I posed the question to Kathryn Donaher as to why the plaza is so big, she responded, “They must have been so optimistic about the future of this space.” This reaction helps reframe the plaza within the time that it was conceived, as a great hope for the future of the City. The displacement of hundreds of people makes it easy to forget about the optimism towards the efforts of urban renewal and the large investment the City was making in the heart of downtown Boston.

“At the time,” Donaher reminded me, “people really thought that this was going to be a great draw for the city. They must have thought that some day that plaza would be filled up with people.” And on occasion, it is.

Hardscape versus Softscape

At one point, the IM Pei plan had programmed grass for the plaza, but Kallman, McKinnel, and Knowels decided to use brick instead. Only recently have trees been added, as an effort to soften the hardness of the plaza. This has everything to do with the original intention to make this a gathering space. McKinnel describes the decision to use hardscape as ‘the answer to the Boston Common’;

“We really did, at that time, think that this possibility of gathering for political purposes, and for joyous occasions, and for protests, was a very important part of the notion of politics, the culture of politics at that time. And so wouldn’t it be wonderful to have a paved plaza where this could happen? Now, in the event it does happen, you know, occasionally, when the Celtics win or the Bruins win, and we get 50,000 people there. Most of the time it doesn’t work. I completely agree, it doesn’t work. What should happen there? Who am I to say?” (McKinnel 4/24/2008).

The Trust answered back to the hardness of the plaza with another Common on the plaza itself. This would be the location of the trees proposed to help block some of the wind.

With the size of the plaza being what it is, it is unlikely that the addition of a park would hurt its ability to perform in the event of large gatherings, but it does offer potential redundancy of the Common. In some ways it seems more like a method designed simply for the purposes of filling some of this vast space.

Activation

The idea of creating a single-use campus for government and offices was a strong component of the original plan. The idea behind this was to rationalize the area as a center of government, and also as a result of the agreement between the City and the local businessmen. There was a hotel in the original plan, however this was not directly on the plaza, nor was it ever built. Planners have learned much since then, and know now that creating a single-use office district will deaden an area, especially at night. Threading other uses throughout the plaza became a significant part of the Trust's plan for activating the space, particularly around the edges.

The size alone serves to dampen what activity does take place on the plaza by dispersing it so widely. It is hard to amass a volume of people here as there is little to invite people to linger. There is also a dearth of seating on the plaza, save for a few benches and the stairs which are too short to be comfortable, and have heavy pedestrian traffic crossing them.

While the plaza is not active on a daily basis, it does serve for those times that there are extremely large events. The often cited example is when the Red Sox win the World Series, this is where people go to celebrate. However, the space being large enough to host such an event is not the only factor in a space being "good" for these events. The plaza may be full of people, but there is no shade or seating or any other form of amenity to accommodate the crowd.

The plaza has also become a seasonal home to the Big Apple Circus. Each year, the circus walks its elephants from Cambridge to City Hall Plaza, where they pitch their big-top tent and hold shows. This is one way to use the vast space on the plaza, and may even add some visual interest. But it is a private use of the space that one must pay for and actually does little to activate the space, as all the activity is happening within the tent, out of the public's view. Furthermore, the tent is bordered by fences erected to hide staging equipment such as generators and cords. It seems this could be better designed to be more of a visual amenity for the plaza, rather than a tent surrounded by a mess of equipment.

Edges

The form of the plaza is convex along three of its four edges. Each corner of the plaza pulls away from the mass, and this is especially true along Cambridge Street with the banana-shaped office building, and along the Sears Crescent. At the symposium McKinnel pointed out the formal problem with the plaza; "It's terribly difficult to make a space which is bounded by a convex wall. I think this just extremely difficult. If you want to have people gather, you make that gesture," he said as he held his arms out in a concave shape.

As mentioned previously, the model most frequently mentioned for the plaza was the Campo de Siena in Italy, and when compared side by side, one can see that the materials, and lines might be similar; however the edges are completely different. The Campo makes an outdoor room with walls that contain the user, whereas City Hall Plaza is dominated on one side by a major street, with the brick bleeding off in all directions.

It is also interesting to note how the building in Boston holds such a prominent position in the plaza, and dominates the space, while the main building in the Campo in Siena (the building with the tower casting the shadow onto the plaza) is able to hold a position of prominence through the geometry of the plaza and its height, without breaking the continuous edge of the space.

According to McKinnel, placing City Hall at the center was a very intentional gesture, to



The arcade added by the Trust has been a positive intervention in creating an edge for the plaza. *Photo: Kristen Hall*

give the building more prominence on the plaza. The Pei plan had called for a building with a much smaller footprint, and Kallman, McKinnel, and Knowels were concerned that the building would be lost in all the space of the plaza. In its current configuration the building is most certainly not lost, but still fails to create any containment of the space, as the stairs slip down the hill past the City Hall on both sides. This is also in part due to the realignment of the building in the Pei plan to be on axis with Quincy Market, which moved the building away from its stronger connection to the surrounding urban context in the AH&G plan.

Symbolism

To hear Michael McKinnel speak about Boston City Hall, it becomes clear what the symbolism behind the building was. He is able to talk about why certain offices are on which corners, and what the various protrusions from the building mean, as well as why the bulk is pulled up, away from the plaza. He is also not unfamiliar with the public's view of the building.

At the symposium he told a story of his affinity for asking cab drivers around Boston what they thought of the new plans for City Hall. On one occasion, his cabbie proceeded to pull out a penny, flip it to the side of the Lincoln Memorial and turn it upside down. "Here," he said, "this is what it looks like."



Compare the form of the Lincoln Memorial on its head and the Boston City Hall.

While this cabby might have been able to see the grand civic gesture turned on its head, there are many who see a building that symbolizes other gestures, like a confusing bureaucracy, or a top-heavy, top-down government. The fact that there is so much disagreement about the symbolism of the building is interesting in itself. It raises a question about the use of a civic gesture that is imperceptible by the citizenry. Or worse, when the attempt at civic is taken for oppression.

Perhaps the constant dialogue for fifty years about this building has effectively created a public discourse about what civic means, and this public discussion itself is what is civic about the building. However, where there is debate about the value of the building, there is only silence on the issue of the plaza, which is widely held to have been a mistake.

Tim Hurley points out in his master's thesis on the plaza, "City Hall Plaza had one purpose: to be the center piece of a development that would revitalize an ailing Boston. Its form, its styles, its function were all secondary to this goal" (Hurley 1995, 28). This opinion differs from the one expressed by McKinnel on the purpose of the plaza as a gathering space. However, when looking at the illegible space created by the plaza, it is easy to understand why one would arrive at the conclusion that the symbolism of the space took primacy over its design as a usable space for people.

Flexibility

The planners of the plaza state that their original intent was that the plaza “should not stand apart as an isolated enclave of public buildings, but should instead participate actively in that mixture of public life which is the existence of downtown” (Cobb 1963). McKinnel reflected on this idea as well when he stated that he had not intended the building and Plaza to stand there for fifty years, unchanged.

While the intention to allow flexibility was written, there has been almost no change to the space since it was built. As mentioned, this is in large measure due to the unwillingness of the GSA to allow any development on the plaza. As a huge, open space, it is possible to bring in large events, as described, but these do not happen on a regular basis, nor are they easy to orchestrate.

Additionally, there is very little on the plaza to interact with. There are a few small corners where one can sit and chat to a friend. The spaces that seem to work really well for this are the pass-through between State Street and City Hall, and the benches aligned in front of the GSA, however these look more like they are designed to stop an automobile from driving into the building than for sitting on.

There are also a few spaces where one can see the intention of creating a more intimate space, particularly in the two smaller areas that jut out above the stairs on either side of City Hall. Despite this possible intention the one to the south is in constant shadow by the tower to the south of it, and the one to the north has a large vent for the subway line underneath, the bricks are broken and have grass growing out of them, and there are large bollards blocking the entrance.



Benches in front of the GSA look more like barricades. *Photo: Kristen Hall*



Corners to create intimate spaces have been left to seed and fill up with trash. *Photo: Kristen Hall*

One space that works particularly well is the arcade designed by Alex Krieger for the Trust for City Hall. It delineates a nice amount of space between its seating and Cambridge Street, and its height delivers a ceremonial presence. The seating alcoves along the edge that cantilever out over the plaza are very comfortable and make for fine intimate spaces. The problem with this edge of the plaza is that the wind is at its strongest along this corridor, and the arcade does little to shelter pedestrians (The Trust for City Hall Plaza 1998). Furthermore, all of the retail activity along this edge is across a busy street and thus only indirectly accessible.

The fact is that much could be done on this nine and a half acre plaza to make it more interactive, delineate smaller spaces, and increase its flexibility for smaller events without reducing its capacity to hold thousands of people comfortably. To rely on these large events to make the space attractive requires much more energy and planning than a more flexible plaza would require.

Connections

Another important aspect of the plaza is that, despite its location at the heart of the city, adjacent to two vibrant markets, the Rose Kennedy Greenway and the popular Hanover Street in the North End, the plaza has not been able to establish itself as a destination amongst this district of destinations.

The Plaza is used as a connection between the subway and the attractions to the north, but does not capture any of this traffic, because there is nothing with which to capture it. As indicated, there are parts of the plaza that do succeed in capturing traffic; ironically they are not located on this popular route, but at the edges of the plaza. With the high traffic flows across the plaza there are many people that could be enticed to sit and stay a minute if there were nice conditions there for sitting – even if only to catch one's breath from the steep stair climb.

Stairs

The site of Government Center lies at the bottom of Beacon Hill, where it meets the Harbor. This elevation change was something to which the original plan referred with the curving office building at the edge of Pershing Square and the elevation change over the site (Meyer 4/24/2008). Of course, the elevation change is necessary as well, because of the alignment of the subway tunnels underneath – especially at the “back” of City Hall, where it meets Congress Street and Faneuil Hall.

All of the steps on the plaza could not have been easily avoided because of all these grade changes. However, it seems that there could have been some better way of arranging them so that the pedestrian would not have to climb any more elevation than needed. As Tim Hurley explains, "While it is physically easier to traverse along a line of elevation, perpendicular to the slope of a hill, the location and layout of the plaza forces one to pass parallel to the slope either up or down" (Hurley 1995, 80).

This is especially true on the path from the subway headhouse to Faneuil Hall, where the stairs jut out into the pedestrian path. Not only are they inconvenient, they also block site lines from the headhouse to Faneuil Hall. In looking at the plaza in plan view, it seems possible that the designers thought this orientation would allow places to sit and look out over the plaza; however this is well traversed, and the heavy foot traffic does not invite people to come sit.

The plan by the Trust addresses this issue by re-grading the entire plaza at a continuous 4% slope from Cambridge Street to Congress Street. This was based on improvements recommended to the Government Center subway station, which included realignment of the subway lines that run underneath. The Trust's plan also included a parking garage below-grade, which would have contributed private development funds to the proposal to pay for some of the changes.



The plaza is an unending obstacle course for those who may have trouble with climbing stairs. *Photo: Kristen Hall*



Boston City Hall Plaza is one of the windiest places in Boston, which makes for an often uncomfortable plaza-going experience. *Photos: Kristen Hall*

Wind

Many think of Chicago as the windiest city in the US, but in fact, Boston is one of the cities that truly claims this title (The Boston Globe 11/13/2003). In fact, the Plan for the Revitalization of City Hall Plaza asserts that Government Center is itself the windiest spot in Boston – if this is true, this would mean that this is one of the windiest spots in the US; and here the City of Boston has placed a wide, open plaza.

The Trust recommended dealing with this in a number of creative ways. The first was to maximize the outdoor activity in the least windy areas, and then to intervene in the plaza with buildings, trees, and a Winter Garden to break up the wind and provide shelter. This would undoubtedly help to make the plaza more comfortable.

As previously stated, the problem in implementing this may have been due to the GSA's desire to be more visually prominent on the plaza. If views to this building are to be maintained from all corners of the plaza, there will be no hope for major development here, and the issue of the wind will not be easily resolved.

Sun

In the images shown of the Campo and the City Hall Plaza, one thing becomes immediately obvious; Boston City Hall Plaza sits bathed in shadow by the buildings surrounding it. The photograph does appear to be taken later in the day based on the length of the shadows, but it is surprising how much of this vast plaza sits in shadow. In the summer months, this may be preferable, but during the majority of the year this would certainly play a large role in the discomfort of the plaza.

Water

As mentioned earlier, there was once a fountain in the plaza, which was apparently well used, when it functioned. The large fountain had problems with leaks and clogged pumps ever since it opened, and finally the frustrated reaction from Mayor Menino was to pave it over (The Boston Globe 6/9/2006).

This reaction reflects frustration with the design, but it also reflects the City's unwillingness to respond to the problems of the plaza with innovative solutions. The slab has been touted by the City as having the possibility of making an excellent stage for musical events, but when it is not being used for that, it is just a large, undecorated slab of cement in the middle of a red, brick plaza.

Maintenance

Maintenance is one of the most challenging issues for this plaza in particular, due to its size and emptiness. Complaints about the appearance of the building and the plaza have a lot to do with how dirty they look; this stands out more when the only objects in the plaza are stairs, trash cans, and trash.

The building has never been cleaned, (McKinnel 4/24/2008) and the plaza is covered in dirty gum-stains. Furthermore, many of the bricks sit unevenly, and I actually witnessed a woman trip on a brick and fall during my observations there. The cracks between the bricks act as ash trays, collecting cigarette butts and other small items of trash between them, and in various corners of the plaza grass is growing up through these cracks.

Seattle outlined in their master plan that they wanted to show the level of maintenance the City was giving to this space, to demonstrate how much the City cares. If this logic is applied to Boston City Hall Plaza, we would draw from this that the City must not care much for this space. There is plenty that could be done to improve the level of maintenance over the short run, including more frequent trash pickups and cleaning the building. Over the long run, improvements made to the plaza should take into account how much the City wants to spend on maintenance and upkeep, and determine a design that will suit this level of involvement.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Being a resident of Boston at the time this is written, it has been much easier for me to visit the plaza on a variety of days and evenings, and develop a fuller sense of what the plaza is like year-round. I have managed to visit the plaza on days when it is full of people and the sun is shining, but more frequently my experience of the place has been while it was devoid of any life.

I think the thing that says the most about my experience of the plaza is that, despite my having walked across it many times, during my "observation" periods there; I managed to find many new areas that I never knew existed. It would seem that many people are unaware of these areas, as they have begun to grow grass through the cracks of the brick, and have bottles and trash strewn about their corners. Furthermore, the size of the plaza is so great that attempting to photograph it was a daunting undertaking.

Contributing to the feeling of emptiness is the fact that there are no markers in the plaza itself besides the steps which occur frequently and seem irrational to the movement of people across the space. The City Hall is really the only object in the space, and it dwarfs what few trees there may be. It feels as though the building is standing in the way of the walk to Quincy Market that is so popular, and the steps create somewhat of an obstacle course, especially for those pedestrians for whom steps are a challenge.

The idea that the City Hall could move to another location as a result of the poor maintenance of the space and the high property values seems somewhat reminiscent of a child who wants to buy new toys rather than take care of the toys he already has. The poor maintenance of the space is not only reflected in its soiled condition, but also in the fact that no entity has been successfully created to maintain this space.

This is reflected in the dissolution of the Trust for City Hall. Had the City really intended to do something about the plaza, they would have created an entity that could survive the time and complications necessary to push past the politics of the space. As it was, the Trust ran out of money because its donors lost interest, if the City truly wanted change on the plaza it seems they could have set up a system that was not destined to fail.

The plaza too was set up to fail, as it was deprived of the tools needed to activate the large space, and was seen as secondary to the composition of the buildings, rather than an element of the composition in itself. Now, fifty years later, an attempt was made to resolve the issue of activation, and has again been stymied by the politics of its abutters.

The plaza remains at the center of controversy, which began as what was supposed to be a grand civic gesture by the City. This gesture was delivered with a heavy hand by removing the existing fabric and creating a space that would allow people to gather in large groups and participate in the civic life of the city, though the plaza was not given the proper tools to succeed. The symbolism of the gesture was too strong; and this careless optimism now reads as failure.

CHAPTER 6

Lessons Learned

In looking at these three cases, we have been presented with many different facets of city hall plazas and their design and implementation. There are plenty of different avenues of exploration leading from each of these cases, but I will attempt to draw out the similarities and differences between these plazas to arrive at some generalizations about city hall plazas in relation to the original three questions which were;

1. What is the difference between a city hall plaza and any other urban plaza?
2. What are the uses intended by the city in the building of the plaza?
3. Finally, how are these intentions manifested in the design of the space? Or rather, what tools (design or otherwise) are used to promote these intentions in the final built form of the plaza?

I have given a brief context for the public spaces in each of the cities, as well as a background on the plazas themselves. I also looked at the plans for each and gave an idea of how each of the plans changed from the beginning concept to the final result, and some of the challenges faced in the process. This was followed by an analysis of the tools used to achieve the goals in the plan, including methods of activation and design.

The results derived from this project would benefit from comparison to more case studies in order to draw broader generalizations with more accuracy. However, given the time constraints on the project, the cases given here provide sufficient depth for analysis, and interesting dimensions for cross-comparison.

QUESTION 1:

What is the difference between a city hall plaza and any other urban plaza?

In the literature review, we found that city hall plazas are asked to perform all the daily responsibilities of any plaza. This includes providing a place to rest and eat lunch, to chat to a friend, to sit back and watch people walking by, a break in the urban fabric.

In addition to this, a city hall plaza is a truly public place in the sense that it belongs to all citizens of a city by nature of their citizenship. This is a place where one finds mostly strangers, known to by their classifications rather than names. One may encounter all classes and creeds of person in a city hall plaza. This is a function unique to civic spaces, which are firmly in the public realm – as opposed to private spaces which do not support this level of heterogeny.

The function of city halls used to be connected with services such as paying parking tickets, picking up birth certificates, and so on. These services are still offered at city halls, but fewer people need go there specifically for these purposes because they are increasingly being offered on the internet. As this function has declined, the implicit function of city halls as a symbolic place for the city has become more explicit. This symbolism extends to the city hall plaza as well.

These spaces are also created to reflect public values through a public process. As Richard Meier states, a community coming together to agree on a common symbol is, in itself, is a civic act (Meier, 1974). Furthermore, the city hall plaza can serve as a forum for public life which most closely relates to the purpose of plazas throughout history.

QUESTION 2:

What are the goals intended by the city in building the plaza?

Through the exploration of these three cases, I have discovered ten different intended goals for city hall plazas. Some of these also can be applied to civic plazas, and some are specific to city hall plazas alone.

Kostof quotes Petrus Berchorius, who said, “Since piazzas are areas in villages or cities, empty of houses and other such things and of obstructions, arranged for the purpose of providing space or set up for meetings of men, it should be remarked that in general through piazzas the condition of man in this world can be discovered.” (Petrus Berchorius in Kostof 1992, 123).

The most common phrase used to describe the city hall plazas across these three places is “the Civic Heart of the City.” What this means in terms of use or design is not completely explicit, but there is some sense that the city hall plaza is an important place for the city and its inhabitants, that links back through the generations of public life to some deeper condition of civitas. Such places where there are no walls and citizens can meet one another are deserving of care and attention in the design to serve a civic function for its citizens. This phrase is the underlying basis for all of the various goals of city hall plazas that are listed below.

In each case the goals of creating a “civic heart” are defined by a plaza’s ability to (1) refer to tradition, (2) relate to the historic piazza, (3) act as an economic catalyst, (4) create connections between disparate neighborhoods, (5) provide open space for everyday activities as well as ceremonial events, (6) symbolize local government and serve as an icon for the city, (7) be a means toward social reflection, (8) be a repository for collective memory, (9) be a sacred space or a space of protest.

1. Refer to Tradition

In the west, there is a tradition of allocating space in front of important buildings. Squares, as open space were a luxury granted to noblemen by kings or religious figures, as the ability to have extra land was not generally permissible. Palaces have almost always had forecourts for means of separating themselves from the populace to provide defensible space (Kostof 1992). This form of a large space in front of a building has become part of our urban vocabulary as a method to indicate an important building.

A city hall can use this device to call out its importance and set it apart from other buildings around it. This is not discussed in any of the plans, but it would seem that this is perhaps an implicit aspect of the function of plazas.

It is also possible that this idea has become more salient over time as the need for city halls to appear more transparent or accessible has also increased (Goodsell 1988). The plaza itself represents the openness that the building no longer achieves.

As experienced in Austin and Boston’s City Halls, there are now security checkpoints at the entryways which stop the easy flow of people from the plaza into the building that each of these plans had promised. The plaza, as an open space, can stand in for the openness of the building itself.

Perhaps the need for defensible space in the past, as created through a forecourt, has now been taken inside to the building entrance, and the plaza serves to mitigate its effect – if not in reality, at least in ideology.

2. Relation to Historic Piazza

As discussed in the literature review, historic piazzas were diverse places that supported many different uses for many different user groups. It was due to this heterogeneity that we have the image of the historic piazza as a democratic space where public life was lived more fully than it is today. Because of the truly public nature of the city hall plaza, which differentiates it from other plazas as more heterogeneous, more users and uses are accommodated here. Hence, these spaces relate much more closely with historic piazzas than any other kind of modern plaza does.

Each of the plans for these plazas espouses the ideal of mixing freely amongst strangers, as a function of the plaza. The plans take this as an important form to preserve. City hall plazas are one of the few typologies that support this type of interaction, and it is fitting that our public agencies to build these truly public plazas. Their ability to effect this, however, may be flawed, especially when public-private partnerships are employed as a means of maintenance.

3. Economic Catalyst

In Boston, there is not necessarily cause-effect that one can point to, but the highly successful Faneuil Hall was created not long after the new Government Center was completed, and following on that was a major period of growth for downtown Boston.

The Second Street commercial district in Austin is flourishing as well, adding cranes on the horizon bringing both commercial and residential development. It is too early to tell what the fate of downtown Seattle is, but the properties sold off by the City are under redevelopment near the site.

While one cannot say that these city hall developments have spurred anything on their own, it cannot hurt the development market for the City to invest in itself.

4. Connections Between Disparate Neighborhoods

Any added space between streets increases connections between areas. By adding a plaza, which is a physical open space that can be traversed, these plazas create more connections through a neighborhood.

Beyond physical connectivity, plazas also provide social connectivity. Each of the plans wants these projects to be a transitional medium (Austin less so, but still it must transition between the river and the downtown). Seattle's Civic Center is asked to knit together the surrounding neighborhoods. This was also a task of the original Boston City Hall Plaza. As Kostof explains, "street and quay are primarily places of transit, capturing public life in momentary pauses from a river of people in motion. The public place, on the other hand, is a destination; a purpose-built stage for ritual and interaction" (Kostof, 1992, 123).

The heterogeneity inherent to civic plazas is what will let these spaces become important connectors of communities. A truly public plaza allows different people living in different areas around the center to come together in one place. A heterogeneous plaza is much more capable of knitting together neighborhoods than a homogenous plaza which would serve to further isolate neighborhoods from one another.

5. Everyday Uses and Ceremonial Events

The ability to gather in a large group and feel the power of the crowd is an important function of city hall plazas. There may be other plazas that are used in a city for this purpose, but these three city halls explicitly attempt to create gathering space that is conducive to a large group of people brought together for some civic purpose.

However, these plazas are also expected to provide a good experience for the every-day plaza user who might be simply eating lunch in the place. This seeming contradiction in use is something each plan attempts to deal with. To achieve both ends in one plaza requires that the plaza work across different scales, which is no easy task. Some of the tools that are used to mitigate this are reviewed in the discussion for Question 3.

6. Symbolism of Local Government and an Icon for the City

In each case, the cities have rebuilt their city halls due to their previous buildings being outdated, or when the functions of the city no longer fit in the existing facilities. But more importantly, in each case the former city halls have been strongly disliked.

Secondary to the outdated infrastructure was the feeling that the old city hall did not represent the ideals of the City. The building in Austin was a twenty-six year "temporary" solution to a need for more space. The one in Seattle was rumored to be based on plans stolen from a Texas motel. The former City Hall in Boston was considered to be a relic of an obsolete form of government that represented top-down authority, and the plaza of the resulting city hall is now the focus of redesigning efforts.

Each city felt a need to re-create the image of the city as a point of pride and as a more accurate depiction of the City through an improved design of the city hall and its plaza.

Furthermore, local government differs from state or federal governments in that it is a much more relevant form of government to city-dwellers that has more bearing on their everyday lives. The role of state and federal government is much more abstract, but the actions of city government deeply effect our daily lives. Thus, it is a level of government that is more closely tied with its constituents - both in spatial and in daily relevance. As the level of government that citizenry will interact with on a more intimate basis, the three cities in these cases felt it was important to reflect this interface.

7. Social Reflection

The design of a city hall is an opportunity to create civic engagement and express the values of a city in built form. The plaza as the most public part of the whole development provides an opportunity for doing this. The participation of citizens in setting out a program of values can be an important process in itself. As seen in Seattle, the debate over the need for a larger amount of open space versus the potential benefits of creating an active open space have provided a platform for people to think about what values they want expressed in their civic spaces.

Similarly, in Boston, the continuing debate about the plaza has become a dialogue about what the public wants their public life to look like. By using these values as a program for design of more permanent built environment, cities hope to provide a space that reflects and preserves the values of their citizens.

8. Repository for Collective Memory

The civic plaza can be the setting for collective memories to be made, and also the setting for collective memories to be enshrined. These can be both good and bad memories. An example of this is the iconic image of civil rights attorney Ted Landsmark being attacked by a young white man with an American flag on the steps of Boston City Hall Plaza. This moment will be forever connected with the Boston busing riots, which both reminds people of the tragedies of the past, and also how far we have come.

In the newer city halls that do not yet have a rich history, this idea of collective memory may actually be made manifest in the idea of a plaza, which has played an important role in public life historically, rather than the specific memory of a space.

9. A Sacred Space or a Space of Protest

To serve as a space for protest or a space of ceremony are two important functions of civic spaces that sit at opposite ends of the spectrum of public participation. These are both unquestionably civic activities, but express opposite feelings. The plans for the three city hall plazas express the desire to become places of civic expression, regardless of what form it takes.

QUESTION 3:

How are these intentions manifested in the design of the space? What tools are used to promote these intentions in the final built form of the plaza?

When expressed in a list such as the one above, it seems that it would be simple to spot a city hall plaza, like stripes on a zebra. However, the way these values are made manifest in the design of a space is a much more complicated question to answer. This is made especially complicated when faced with the challenge of designing seemingly contradictory uses.

For example, some of these contradictions are: How can a plaza fit several thousand people comfortably one day, and a handful of people comfortably the next? How can a plaza communicate symbolic importance and permanence while still being approachable and intimate? How can a plaza enhance the interaction between the people themselves rather than an object and the people? How can a plaza be a public space shared by a whole city and support heterogenous interactions while still being a comfortable place? How does a historic form maintain its relevance in a changing society? Finally, how does a city sustain these values within these plazas over time?

These questions and contradictions pose a design challenge in three plazas explored here, which are addressed by each city with a multiplicity of design responses. In the cases where contradictions appear, one of these plazas might have found a way of satisfying both conditions, but often the device can not satisfy both conditions at the same time. The end result is that all the intended goals are not able to be fully expressed.

The following is a compilation of the tools these cities have employed to promote the goals they espouse for their city hall plazas, and I have listed the goals that each tool has tried to address. In some cases too tools have achieved the aims of the goals, in some cases they have not, this relationship is described. It is important to note that each one of these could be an entire thesis in itself, so I will restrict my discussion to the elements of these that are pertinent to their bearing on the uses outlined for the three city hall plazas I have studied.

1. Environmental Conditions

Goals Addressed: Everyday Uses and Ceremonial Uses

Environmental context is important in all plazas as a way to make these places more comfortable for their users. This is something that plazas struggle with generally, and much has been written on means for dealing with these problems, so we will not dwell on this point, save to say that each of the three plazas explored here has their own challenges as a result of their weather, and each have attempted to mitigate this in some way. City hall plazas have the added challenge and opportunity of leveraging these design interventions for the purpose of making the plaza more civic.

Seattle did not need as many shade structures, and so chose to have fewer trees in the center of their plaza to allow this space to better act as a gathering space. Austin chose to have trees and a shade structure that is tied into its amphitheater. This use of photovoltaic cells in the shade structure positions sustainability as a statement and a symbol, which was important to their citizens. Boston has little intervention on the climatic elements now, but the Trust's plan for Boston City Hall Plaza was a reference to one of Boston's existing successful public spaces – the Common, as well as creating more public indoor space.

2. Hardscape versus Softscape

Goals Addressed: Refer to Tradition, Everyday Uses and Ceremonial Uses, Sacred / Protest Space

The argument over hardscape versus softscape is really an argument about a park versus a plaza. In all three cases when the public was presented with the opportunity for new open space, they asked for a park, not a plaza. This tension was always resolved by the program for a high level of activity, which requires hardscape to withstand the intensity of use. However, the designers responded to the desire for park with varying degrees.



While Austin's City Hall Plaza has tried to incorporate softscape, Seattle's Civic Center is primarily a hard-scaped place. *Photos: Kristen Hall*

In Austin, the desire for a park was merged into the form of the plaza, by providing park-like spaces around the edges of the plaza which allow individuals to sit in the grass under a tree, as they would in a park, and still participate in a civic event like a music concert. In Seattle, the decision was explicit that a plaza is not a park, but to show the citizens all the various ways that a plaza can become a place for activity and interaction, like a park is. The tool they used for this was water, which as a dynamic, interactive element is constantly changing and reacting to the user.

There is a deeper question here about nature in the city and what it means to people. In my interview with Kathy Donaher, she described a survey that the Trust for City Hall had done on people's favorite places in Boston. Everyone said their favorite place was the Common or the Public Garden or some other green space. They said what they really wanted was an urban oasis, away from the hustle and bustle of the city. However, the Trust did a second survey of open space usage in Boston, which showed that people really did not use the green spaces like they said they did, but instead the most people could be found in places like Newbury Street, an urban shopping avenue with plenty of opportunities to be amongst people.

The lesson, as she stated it, was to be wary of the difference between what people say they want and what they actually want. In their minds they want an urban oasis, some reference to our pastoral heritage where one can play amongst the trees, but in reality, people like those places in cities which provide exciting opportunities for interaction and spontaneity.

While this approach, taken in a general sense, could become proscriptive of public space, and give the impression that designers know best, in the context of a city hall plaza, where the design requires more formality and has a higher intensity of uses, the designer can take comfort in the idea that while people do enjoy parks, they also enjoy urban public places that are not parks.

3. Forum and Focus

Goals Addressed: Refer to Tradition, Relation to Historic Piazza, Everyday and Ceremonial Uses, Symbol of Local Government, Repository for Collective Memory

All three of these plazas employ some forum for public gathering around a central object. In Austin the central object is a stage with facing steps that create a type of amphitheater, in Boston, the plaza slopes down toward the building, creating a very large sort of arena facing the City Hall, and in Seattle, the amphitheater is the central object itself.

This instinct to arranging an audience towards a central focus refers back to ancient forums, which are an ancestor of the city hall plaza. In Alexander's Pattern Language, this is called "Something Roughly in the Middle," a pattern that he thinks should occur in any plaza to appease our geometric sense that something should be placed in the center of an open space; much like the decorative desire we have to place something in the middle of an empty table.

It is interesting, in this context, that the designers of Seattle's Civic Square decided to take their object out of the middle. The People's Pavilion was a strong statement about civic engagement, designed specifically for the purpose of housing performances and speeches. The decision to remove it was in part because it would need to be programmed, which would make it inflexible and unsupportive of spontaneous performance, as the amphitheater is intended to do. The second reason has to do with the fact that it is an object, and the designers wanted the square to be more about civic participation between citizens; not between citizens and objects.

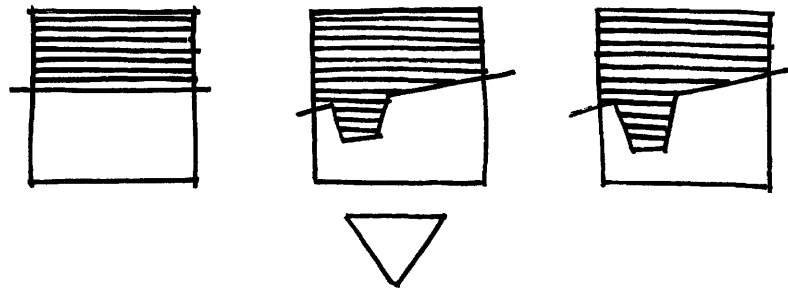
In theory, this is the most democratic way of organizing the space, as it emphasizes the interaction of equal citizens rather than the interaction between citizens and the City. By providing a platform that is available to everyone at all times the designers are attempting to support ad hoc democratic interaction. This space will ideally become instant performance space that creates a sort of epicenter of action: a focal point of the whole area, with the citizens at the center.

Austin has a similar idea, with the amphitheater itself a prominent object in the plaza. The stage, which is actually the focus of the attention during events, is designed very minimally, with a simple limestone platform. In fact, the stage was so under-designed that the City had to put up a temporary tent to shelter performers from the sun. While this could be construed as a similar idea to Seattle's Civic Square, the connection between the stage and the amphitheater is so strong as to give the impression of directing the audience's attention at the stage, rather than give them the opportunity to interact with one another the way the circular amphitheater does in Seattle.

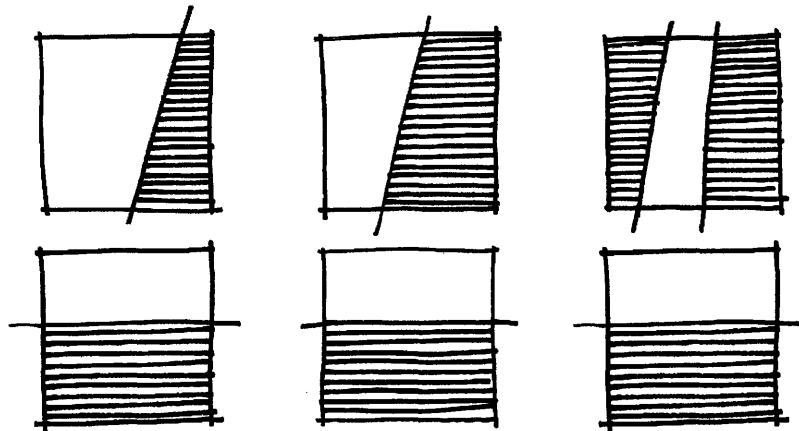
4. Size

Goals Addressed: Refer to Tradition, Relation to Historic Piazza, Connections Between Neighborhoods, Symbolism of Local Government, Sacred / Protest Space

The combination of the existing block pattern and the building program was the biggest factor in determining the size of Austin and Seattle's civic spaces. The size of the plazas



Austin's City Hall Plaza was negotiated from a setback of 140' to a smaller amount, but adding in the traffic triangle across the street. When this did not work out, the plaza's size remained smaller than originally planned. *Source: Kristen Hall*



(Civic Square is top block, City Hall is bottom block.) Seattle's Civic Square went from being 66% of the block, down to 45% to accommodate development. The size was then reduced again to accommodate retail development on the 45% of the plaza, leaving less than half this amount. *Source: Kristen Hall*



AH&G figure-ground



I. M. Pei figure-ground

The plan for Boston's Government center made the plaza larger by reducing the size of the City Hall and realigning it in Pei's plan. The architects of the building then enlarged it for fear of a plaza too large. *Source: Hurley, 1995*

resulted from the space left over after the building program was determined; rather than some consideration of the appropriate size needed to serve an anticipated amount of people.

In Seattle the size of the plaza was initially determined, but then reduced to accommodate development on the site. Then it was further reduced to accommodate an increased program of development. The City began with the conviction that a significant amount of open space should be preserved and later shrunk the amount of open space from 66% of the block down to 45% down further to about 20% of the block. The plan compensates for this by having two plazas across a street from each other, but the open space is broken up.

Austin's designers tried to incorporate the Draco Triangle across a busy street from the plaza, but were not allowed to reroute the right of way. One of the designers, Phil Reed, laments that the plaza is too small as a result, and the connections across the busy street to the Colorado River are further complicated. The plaza was initially to be much bigger, but the building heights severely restricted the capacity of the City Hall, and the abutters were more willing to negotiate on the sides of the building envelope rather than the building height. The result was loss of plaza space as the building grew outward.

The case of Boston had much different circumstances where the existing streets were irrelevant because they were destroyed to make way for the project. The designers completely defied the existing street pattern on purpose, and as a result have a plaza that is far too large. Kostof states it well when he explains that the "fundamental social value of public spaces was being sacrificed in the modern metropolis to the functionalist calculations of traffic engineers and the grandiloquent agoraphilia of planners" (Kostof 1992, 138).

Now they are trying to put some of the streets back into the plaza to shrink it down and make it a more coherent space at a more human scale. If Boston's plaza is any lesson, it is clear that while Seattle and Austin might have wanted more space, the streets will benefit the city more than the plazas will.

The question that this contrast raises is: what scale is "civic"?

In the case of Boston, the size was tied to the optimism. This optimism makes sense if one of the purposes of these projects is to reinvigorate downtowns and create a civic heart of the city. Indeed, there should be optimism about their ability to draw people to these places. This optimism, in turn, leads to a need for a plaza as a gathering place for all the people that will come to this civic heart.

However, smaller plazas, down to a certain point, are almost guaranteed to be viewed as more successful because they get filled up much more quickly. By this measure, large plazas are almost guaranteed to be seen as failures because they are impossible to fill. Alexander says that a plaza should have on average 150 – 300 square feet of space for every occupant to make it feel full. But if one of the primary intentions of the plaza is to host large events, it would need to be much bigger than the average plaza.

The key seems to be flexibility in the program. In Seattle we see that there is possibility of closing down a street to accommodate size, which was an intentional part of the program. We can see from Seattle's City Hall Plaza and Austin's as well that vertical separation, if too exaggerated or limited in access will create a feeling of disconnectedness. But, perhaps during a large event it loses the feeling of disconnectedness.

Regardless of how it is done there seemed to be a fear of creating spaces too large in Austin and Seattle. The intentional shrinking of the plaza in Seattle and the sacrifice of the plaza in Austin demonstrate a kind of agoraphobia opposite of the agoraphilia that Kostof describes in the modern movement, visible in Boston's plaza.

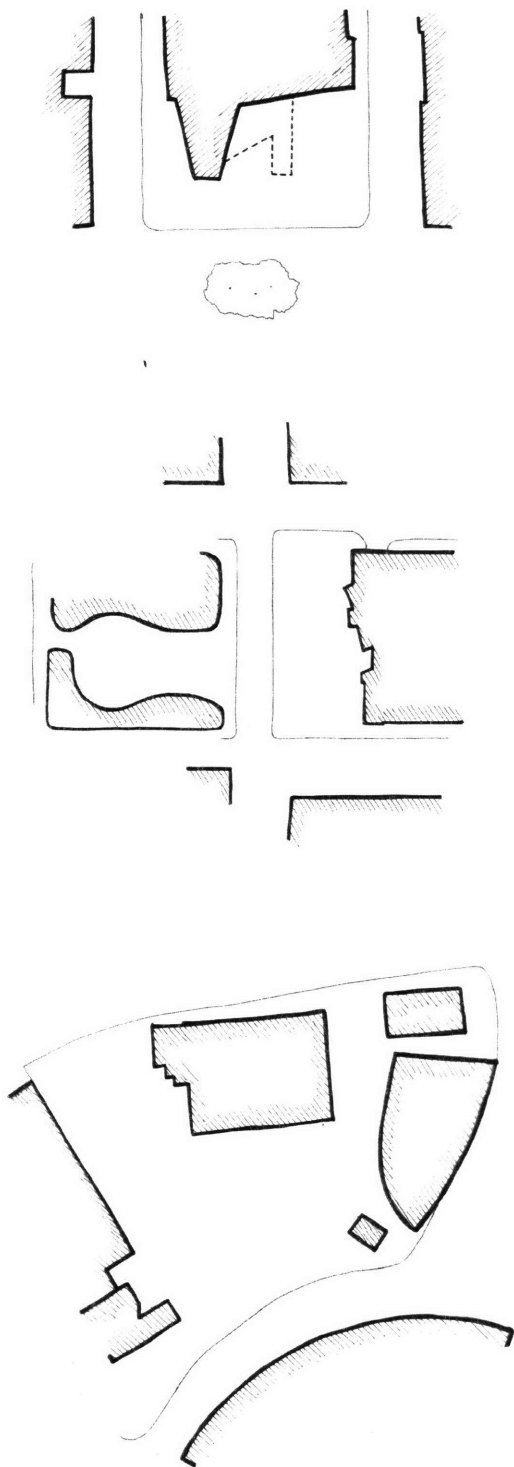
The fear is of creating dead spaces like Boston's plaza. The Trust's plans for Boston were centered around the idea of trying to shrink it down. Furthermore, we have learned from Boston that the size alone is not what will help a large event be comfortable. There are several factors which help this, such as the way it feels when it's full of people. There is some important part of civic-ness that means that you must be able to feel the size of the crowd, which would indicate a smaller plaza as well.

There is also a tension between the provision of open space for the sake of open space and the ability to maintain it. Size argument breaks down to activation, maintenance, cost, preservation, program, large events vs. intimacy.

5. Flexibility

Goals Addressed: Everyday and Ceremonial Uses

If city hall plazas are to support so many different uses, they must have the ability to respond to the various programs imposed on them. They are asked to be useful for large public gatherings, but they are still required to respond to daily uses of a heterogenous user group. Some aspects of flexibility have already been discussed in relation to the size and focus of the plaza, but another element which provides or reduces flexibility is the plaza's edges.



Top: Austin City Hall Plaza, Middle: Seattle Civic Center, Bottom: Boston City Hall. The edges of the three plazas are shown here. It is easy to see that Seattle's plaza is the most contained, while Boston's is the least. *Source: Kristen Hall*

6. Edges

Goals Addressed: Relation to Historic Piazza, Economic Catalyst

The edges of these plazas are composed of streets and buildings, but primarily streets. Kostof, using a European approach thinks that for a square to be successful in an urban setting, it must be the opposite of a building; a void cut out of the urban fabric, rather than an undefined, too large open space with a building in the middle of it. "A liberated church with space all around it 'will always appear like a cake on a serving platter'" (Sitte, in Kostof 1992, 138).

This is especially problematic with city buildings if they are to be set off by the plaza because of the need to elevate the prominence of a building by using open space around it. This does not give the perception of creating open space, but instead creates the perception of a building with space around it. It should instead be conceived of as an open space that can stand on its own. This is a problem that can be seen especially well in Boston's City Hall Plaza.

Streets are an interesting challenge to these plazas. They bring foot traffic to the plaza, but they also bring car traffic past the plaza. They provide view corridors to the plaza, but if they are busy they become inaccessible as public open space. Busy streets create hard edges that can be prohibitive to the space, but a slower street can provide spill-over space or in large events where traffic is re-routed.

In these three cases we have seen the issue of the streets addressed with buildings, bollards, benches, and arcades. In each case it must be carefully considered whether this street should have people brought out to it, how to have people brought across it, and in some cases, how the street can be changed or taken out of the equation entirely.

In Seattle, the design of the open space spanning the street will allow the plaza to double in size when needed, but otherwise serves to separate the spaces from one another. In Austin, the plaza has missed the busy pedestrian street, and is instead located on the busy automobile street which brings the wrong kind of traffic. Boston removed all the streets and effectively removed the life from the plaza and is now trying to add back in the right kind of streets.

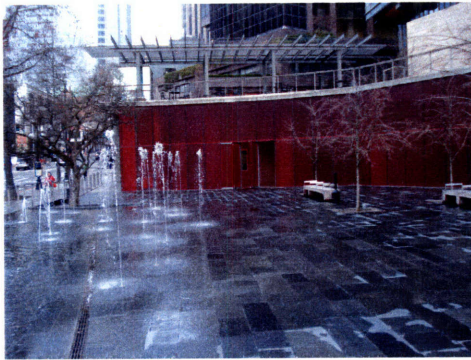
The building edges have also posed a challenge to the plazas in terms of entryways and transparency. In Seattle, despite many doors, the red wall has cancelled out retail possibilities, but the future project is hoping to maximize activity between plazas and buildings. Austin faces on a river and has no buildings along the plaza's longest edge, but has tried to increase connections onto the plaza from the front of the City Hall and the parking garage. Boston has dispersed buildings with little relation to each other and few entrances on the plaza. We can see that none of these spaces has been very successful in creating good edges, except, perhaps Seattle's future Civic Center, but this remains to be seen.

7. An Ethic of Care

Goals Addressed: Economic Catalyst, Connections between Disparate Neighborhoods, Sacred / Protest Space, Symbolism of Local Government

An element that relates closely with size is the maintenance of the space, or rather, the ability to maintain the space. As we have seen expressed in the plans, a high level of maintenance is not simply a way to make the space more attractive, it demonstrates an ethic of care on the part of the city toward its public spaces. This refers to the idea that the care of a city's symbols, such as a city hall and its plaza, reflects the city's pride in itself. Like a well-tended lawn says something about its owner, a well-maintained plaza says something about its city.

One way to give form to this ethic of care was demonstrated in Seattle's plan, which indicated they wanted the maintenance to be obvious to show that this space was cared for. Another alternative to this is Austin's plan which specified that the City did not want a level of care that would require too much maintenance. They used plants that require less watering and pruning, which is more appropriate for the climate, and requires less maintenance. This also needs also need to be balanced with size; if the plaza is too big it will be difficult to keep clean.



While Seattle's Civic Center has indicated that they want a high level of maintenance to show in their plaza, Boston has not been able to create a mechanism for sustaining its City Hall Plaza. *Photos: Kristen Hall*

In the Boston case we can see a contradiction between the City's interest in creating symbolism in the built form, and their willingness to maintain it. For some reason the City is unwilling to pay for the changes or maintenance themselves. Mayor Menino set up the Trust as an organization that had to be self-sustaining, rather than the City paying for the planning and implementation of the process themselves. (As an aside, it is even stranger as Boston is uniquely set up to do this kind of development, being that their planning agency, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, is also a development agency.) Considering that changes to the plaza were met with such enthusiasm from the public, it would seem that the City should have been willing to arrange a more sustainable process for maintenance of the plaza.

Boston's case demonstrates the importance of deciding on the degree of maintenance that a city wants to uphold, and to design the space accordingly. Austin's landscape will mostly take care of itself, and require less maintenance. This was an explicit goal in the Master Plan because the City of Austin is responsible for maintenance. Where Seattle has expressed a desire for a visibly high level of maintenance, they have also built in a system for private interests to pay for this over the long run, but will still be managed by the City.

8. Public-Private Partnerships

Goals Addressed: Economic Catalyst, Relation to Historic Piazza

In combination with design and maintenance of a plaza, there must be some system put in place to oversee and sustain these processes. As discussed in the beginning, there is an increasing trend toward cities leveraging private interests in the design and maintenance of their public spaces.

A city hall seems too politically important a space to be completed by a private entity, as this would imply favoritism or sustained political influence of the funding party. However, it is not entirely out of the question that the plaza be paid for by a private entity.

Seattle has managed to have half of its public open space designed and developed through a public-private partnership. It is telling that the City Hall and its plaza were created by the City, but the square across the street – which in theory is to be co-terminus with the plaza as a single civic space – is being developed by private interests. The separation of the two spaces by a street seems to be sufficient for public acceptance of this arrangement. The City will maintain control through their ownership of the Civic Square which will allow them to determine the management practices and thus preserve the heterogeneity of the space that might have been otherwise threatened.

But, more than any of the other three cities, Seattle has a problem with homelessness which might become an issue in their privatization of this public space. This is perhaps the reason the citizens are so willing to accept privatization of this public space – because it might mean that there will be fewer homeless people in this space.

The developers are insistent that the space will not be managed so as to be exclusive of any individuals, but it is possible that the market atmosphere will do the policing of this space. As Elizabeth Blackmar (2006) has shown, urban marketplaces are aimed at an upper- and middle-class demographic, and result in much more homogenous user group. However, if one looks to the other major market in Seattle, Pike's Place, one will find homeless there as well, so perhaps Seattleites are a contradiction to Blackmar's theory. This is also a slippery slope, as one could fall into the argument that any activation of these places – free or not – might displace people who already feel marginalized. This is a topic to be explored further in the section on Activation.

As discussed in the literature review, there are those who think that privatization of public space is not such a tragedy, that in fact, it yields much better public spaces, and can be regulated such that the space maintains its publicness, as Seattle has arranged. As Alex Krieger (designer of the new arcade on Boston City Hall Plaza) convincingly states:

"There is a tendency to view community space as monolithic; it is either for the public or it is not. But there are many thresholds for public intercourse. Although you are there at the management's discretion, many citizens may feel more comfortable in a private shopping mall than in a public library. In a mall, one can walk and stroll and sit and dine. One can gaze, preen, and flirt. The hours are good. You can go there on weekends. In the most sophisticated malls you can visit your dentist and, soon, surely, pay your real-estate taxes or renew your driver's license. In a public library, by contrast, one has to be quiet. This is not an argument in support of building malls rather than libraries. It is merely a reminder about

the breadth of public needs and expectations, some of which may be provided through humble means." (Krieger 1995, 76)

However, this also results in the means of activation of private spaces being directed at those who will be able to participate in them economically, as well as socially. If city hall plazas are one of the few kinds of plazas that will promote heterogeneity, then perhaps this is a line that should not be crossed. It is an important debate which cannot be solved simply.

In response to the costs associated with maintenance and programming of space, Boston created a non-governmental agency to manage its space. A trust is not a new way to manage space, as this model has been used in places like Central Park in New York. However, the story of the Trust reveals the flaw of the model. Because a trust is dependent upon private interests to support it, once the interest of supporters wanes, the mechanism falls apart.

The way the Trust for Boston City Hall Plaza fell apart is particularly sad, as the reason for the loss of interest was due in large part to its impotence in negotiating political hurdles to accomplish the goals that would have kept interest alive. It seems a shame and perhaps an irony that the maintenance of Boston's City Hall Plaza was dependent on a system doomed to fail, and yet the City Hall and its Plaza are supposed to be a symbol of City government.

9. Grain of Development

Goals Addressed: Refer to Tradition, Relation to Historic Piazza, Economic Catalyst, Connections between Neighborhoods, Social Reflection

Urban renewal projects like Government Center changed the way we think about government projects. Cities have found more sensitive ways of injecting themselves into the cityscape, rather than imposing themselves upon it. This accounts for a lot of the differences between the two more recent plazas and Boston's plaza.

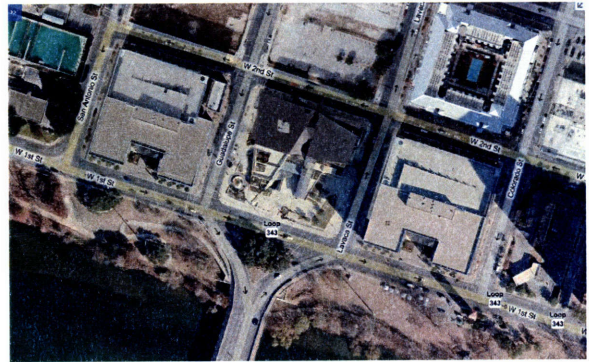
This is especially visible in the way that retail is integrated into the developments. The idea of having retail physically in the same building as both Austin and Seattle's city halls is the opposite of what Government Center was trying to achieve as a campus of government and offices.

Austin fit its building into the existing grain, and added uses along Second Street, to continue the retail corridor. They respected the grain and went along with it. Seattle is adding

finer grain through its Civic Square than what exists in the neighborhood.. Boston decimated the grain and imposed itself on the context with a different spatial logic. Now it is trying to get back to something more closely resembling the grain that once existed there.

It is telling that even though Seattle was trying to consolidate its functions into a civic campus, it did not exclude the retail functions, but instead threaded them through the development. There seems to be a recognition that government services function in the cityscape the same way that offices do, despite their perhaps 'loftier' purposes. People still sit in offices for most of the day, go out to eat lunch at lunch time, and go home at the end of the work day. To have a center dedicated to this schedule is the same as having a center like an office park – and even an office park needs a coffee shop or two.

In the case of Boston, it was seen that contradicting the existing form would serve as an economic catalyst to bring people back to a more rational, less congested center. As has been discussed, it is possible this had the intended effect. However, in retrospect, many Bostonians feel that the existing form should not have been sacrificed. In this regard, the decision to bring back the historic fabric is a reflection of the community's desire to maintain historical references in the built form.



When compared side by side, it is clear how Boston's Government Center has decimated the grain of the existing city, while the other two plazas have respected the fabric of their neighborhoods. *Photos: Kristen Hall*

10. Symbolism

Goals Addressed: Refer to Tradition, Relation to Historic Piazza, Everyday and Ceremonial Uses, Symbolism of Local Government, Social Reflection, Repository for Collective Memory, Sacred / Protest Space

The symbolism of the building in all three of these cases takes primacy over the symbolism of the plaza, and I would expect this to be the case for all city hall plazas. Buildings are always designed as three dimensional objects whereas plazas are not always designed with the same degree of care and attention. However, the relationship between the building and the plaza is an important part of the experience of both. The edges of the building and the way the plaza interacts with the building are important elements in the plaza itself. The imagability of a building as an icon in association with the plaza is important element for each of them.

The symbolism in these plans is not entirely what I expected when I first started this research. I expected to find ideals of transparency, openness, and approachability in the buildings and was not surprised to read these very words in each of the three plans. However, I also expected to find symbols of government that were reflective of permanence and European open spaces. What I found instead were various ways of interpreting the permanence of space, and branding of the plazas with an explicit identity for the city. Each of the three cases attempted to attach the symbols of timelessness through a reference to their specific natural context and the use of branding as a way of stating the city's identity.

The branding to which I refer here is not branding in the sense of corporate sponsorship, but the city promoting an identity for itself through its branded image. For example, Seattle is known as the home of Starbuck's and many other coffee shops. Seattle's Civic Center will have at least three coffee shops by the time it is completed; two of them already exist in the City Hall and another is programmed for the Civic Square as well.

Austin calls itself "the Live Music Capital of the World" and has accordingly centered its plaza on the performance of live music, and holds a concert series with performances at least once a week. The strong connection with nature on the plaza is also reflective of the 'outdoorsy' citizens and their desire for a space reflecting this value.

The original plan for Boston was themed on a 'New Boston' with a government that would be more responsive to citizens, and the Government Center plan reflected the thought of

the day on the ideal form of a city. The plans by the Trust place a replica of Boston's famous public place, the Boston Common onto the City Hall Plaza, branding this space with Boston's claim on history.

Sustainability is a feature in the Austin and Seattle plans, for understandable reasons. The symbolism of a sustainable design fits in with the city's desire to show permanence that sustains over time, as well as demonstrating the views of the society. The use of nature in all three of these plazas fits with this ideal, however this symbolism was not always immediately obvious at first glance.

Austin's plaza is by far the easiest to find elements of the natural. The abundant use of rough-cut Luddite limestone and the terracing of the form are obvious references to the Austin hill country, and almost blend with the river's edge when viewed from the opposite shore. A sapling from the historic Treaty Oak is planted in the plaza, with concentric rings in the paving to show the future growth of the tree. Around the tree is a composition that immediately references the nine planets of our solar system, using boulders of different materials and sizes.

The vortex of water with a drain at the bottom seems to refer to limited water resources, as water from the air conditioning pours out of the side of the building down more rough-hewn limestone, again referencing the balconies of the nearby hill country. These are all obvious symbols that are easily read as one walks around the plaza, and should one have trouble reading these symbols, there is ample signage and promotional material to help explain it.

However, despite the presence of much stone, which seemingly represents permanence and stability, the copper cladding of the building and the rings of the Treaty Oak sapling refer to the passage of time. The explicit use of copper; a material that visibly ages, and the reference to the future growth of the tree anchor the plaza and the building in the future history of the City in an interesting and explicit way.

Seattle makes extensive use of water and slate in its Civic Center, which refer to the color and texture of the water that surrounds the downtown on both sides, and is an important part of Seattle's culture. While there are many trees, these are used more as decorative elements on the periphery to create enclosure than for some other symbolic purpose. The circular shape of the amphitheater, however, was inspired by the rings around a knot in wood grain, referring to the history of the area as an important place in the forest industry

which helped establish Seattle as a major city. Finally, the red wall on the City Hall is supposed to represent a sunset, and actually does a fairly nice job of this at night when it is lit up.

The reference to nature at Boston's Government Center is nowhere made apparent, however Jack Meyer explained that the banana-shaped office building at the west of the development was supposed to represent the way that Beacon Hill descends, and that this point is situated at the transition between Beacon Hill and Boston Harbor. The "walk to the sea," while hardly explicit in the form of the plaza, was supposed to represent a walk through Boston's history out to the sea. This reference to the topography and the various stages of development as one proceeds toward the harbor is intended to reference the fact that Boston has been created over the centuries, literally filled in by man.

These connections with nature aim to make the spaces seem more permanent and rooted in a long history of place that was once steered more by the forces of nature than the forces of man. However sometimes the connection is too abstract, as in Boston where the natural element of the 'last escarpment of Beacon Hill' is not at all obvious. In order for these themes to have weight, they must be more explicit in their design expression. An art teacher of mine once said that design is the opposite of ambiguity; in the design of these plazas, this would seem to be a good rule.

The use of nature seems to be a popular theme because it is a way of inserting permanence and importance without using oppressive or overly didactic forms. Austin's City Hall Plaza has been criticized for not being 'urban' enough to be a civic plaza; but if we are only to make plazas that are perceived as civic by everyone, then we will be forever restricted to neoclassical columns for all of our civic architecture, and perhaps lifeless plazas.

11. Activation

Goals Addressed: Relation to Historic Piazza, Economic Catalyst, Connections between Neighborhoods, Everyday and Ceremonial Uses, Symbolism of Local Government, Sacred of Protest Space

The goal of activation is in all of these plazas the most important goal. Above the symbolism and the edges and the ability to pay for maintenance is first the desire to bring people to the plaza. I quoted Brill earlier where he states, "While a rich public life is generally considered desirable, it is seldom actually described. There may even be an underlying and simple assumption that what happens in public places is public life" (Brill 1989, 26). This is particularly relevant to this aspect of the discussion.

Successful European places, where sidewalk cafes and shops abound, rely heavily retail as the great activator. Boston's plaza has discovered this late in the game, but the other two have learned from the mistakes of these places. The contradicting uses of civic space that was outlined earlier proves itself to the fullest in the question about activation. This is where the question of "what is civic?" emerges most clearly.

If Chidister is right, and we are spatially segregated in our cities because this is our true desire, then how can a city hall plaza, that is supposed to be a reflection of our values as a society, be a place where individuals of all colors and creeds can come together?

The Seattle designers came up with a list of activities that could take place in their Civic Square – these included activities such as bocce ball and flamenco lessons. Of course these things can happen in these places, but do they? And do they happen amongst a diverse group of strangers?

It is also a bit silly to think that these places that are required to be so large as to host thousands and so comfortable as to be "just like an old ethnic neighborhood" (Krieger 1995). And at the same time, we expect these places to be active constantly, so as to create a civic heart, so as to enliven a struggling downtown and spur a 24-hour economy. How can one plaza possibly achieve all this?

In pondering this question of why activation was such a big part of each one of these plans and thinking about the lengths gone to in trying to create an active civic plaza, I came to the conclusion that activation has actually been mistaken for participation. There seems to be some sense that if these cities can get their citizens to come down to city hall, then democracy will have been fulfilled. The problem is that participation at a music concert is not the same as participation in a public meeting, and attending the former does not necessarily improve the chances that a citizen will attend the latter.

Lastly, the activation of the space does not simply refer to activities that have been programmed for the space, like a child's birthday party, to keep the people entertained. It also refers to the ability of the plaza to draw civic uses to it.

The word "activation" implies an action taken by a party to make these spaces active. However, Donaher of the Trust for City Hall Plaza made an important point about the relationship between activity and design, a lesson hard learned from her experience with the Trust. She said that while it is important to activate the space, program will only last as long as the money lasts. If the money runs out, the plaza must draw people on the merits of its

design alone. The quality of the design in the absence of program is the true test of the plaza's ability to be activated.

The need for activation is tied to the optimism that creates large plazas in the first place. The hope is that people will come down to the plaza and mix in public, and that they will come to participate in government in some meaningful way. The confusion is that somehow a public life on the plaza will be able to support real democratic relations between people and their government. While public life is indeed important, and it is imperative to have public open space to support urban public life, this is not the same as civic participation in a government. This confusion is perhaps the root of the contradiction.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: Thoughts on Civic Participation

What is the need for a city hall plaza? There are many goals attached to these places, and there are tools used to attempt to achieve these goals, however successful they may or may not be – as has been addressed in the previous chapter. By looking deeper than the goals for the space we can see that there is some sense that city hall plazas are an important element of each of these city hall designs.

Underlying the all the goals is some sense that city hall plazas exist for a democratic purpose that is perhaps more powerful than the building can provide on its own. The conception of the plaza is perhaps an imperative of the democratic design, and fulfills the need for the building to appear transparent and accessible. The plaza itself represents the openness that the building cannot achieve.

In his book on city hall council chambers, Goodsell outlines three movements in the design of these spaces; traditional, modern, and contemporary. Each of the three periods is defined by the way they position government in relation to its citizens. The traditional movement places government in the supreme position of the power structure, because this is where the power was during the time these buildings were built – an example of this would be Boston's first City Hall building.

The following movement was the modern movement which celebrated bureaucracy and its liberation from the corrupt, boss-led politics of the traditional era through rational systems and transparency of government. Boston's Government Center came at the end of this movement, on the heels of the next, the contemporary movement.

Contemporary designs promote the citizen participation idea, which Goodsell describes as a system where "citizens do not merely vote or run for office to control their destinies; they become actively and directly involved in the very processes of governance." However, as idealistic and democratic as this sounds, he goes on to say that "the nobility of the concept

in terms of fulfilling the potentialities of citizenship can be buried by an empty hypocritical ritualism that only masks the powerlessness of the ordinary citizen. The Contemporary chamber, then, expresses a noble ideal, but it also offers itself as a setting for the callous corruption of that ideal” (Goodsell 1988, 199).

This is a powerful cynicism about the possibilities of people to influence government. However, we can see examples of some of Goodsell’s “corruptions” of the “noble ideal” of citizen participation in these three cases. One example of this is Austin’s “protest window” that sits at the back of the council chambers, facing onto a wide bit of the sidewalk. The window is supposed to provide a platform for protesters to be seen during council meetings, without allowing the protesters to disturb the proceedings. The immediate allusion is that of a citizenry to be seen and not heard. It also removes them from the front of the building where the scene of protesters under the Austin City Hall sign would be more im-
gible and powerful.

Furthermore, Austin’s plaza and Seattle’s Civic Center have been labeled “free speech zones,” a seemingly redundant designation in a county that guarantees this right to every citizen regardless of their location during a verbal transgression. This kind of soft democracy is the corruption that Goodsell speaks of. It is as if the permission from the city to protest immediately dampens its effect. It is no longer an act of rebellion, which immediately strips the power of the act.

Does this mean that a city hall plaza is like a corporate plaza – an amenity that is required of the building? Or, does a city hall plaza actually support the democratic ideals it espouses, better than the building can. Perhaps there is no difference. Perhaps the intention of the plaza is only important as far as it serves to shape its form.

But what is the form of democracy? Open space alone does not create democracy, nor does an amphitheater. They support public interaction, and a city hall plaza is supposed to support a diversity of people who can come together in public and gain social knowledge. To say that democracy is created through form seems an extreme. Perhaps a better question is: when it already exists, what is the form that promotes it?

Perhaps we have a sense of what is civic embedded in us that comes from some experience of civic moments. As Brill eloquently states, “Extraordinary events are, by definition, public events. These have been often noted as events that make all strangers somehow more available for interaction and more reciprocally empathetic” (Brill 1989, 29). Perhaps it is not possible to design a space with an intention of democracy or participation in mind.

Richard Meier implies that throughout history, the production of symbols has been a public affair, which creates bonds amongst individuals (Meier 1974). Perhaps one can only hope to create a symbol that is strong enough to create a common bond, even if the bond is debate, as in Boston City Hall, or the sacred, as in the Seattle Center.

Sacred spaces and spaces of debate or protest sit as counterpoints to one another in the public realm, however they both involve a type of participation in public life that is truly civic. Mumford describes this aspect of civic life beautifully in his essay "What is a City?"

"One may describe the city, in its social aspect, as a special framework directed toward the creation of differentiated opportunities for a common life and a significant collective drama. As indirect forms of association, with the aid of signs and symbols and specialized organizations, supplement direct face-to-face intercourse, the personalities of the citizens themselves become multi-faceted: they reflect their specialized interests, their more intensively trained aptitudes, their finer discriminations and selections: the personality no longer presents a more or less unbroken traditional face to reality as a whole. Here lies the possibility of personal disintegration; and here lies the need for reintegration through wider participation in a concrete and visible collective whole. What men cannot imagine as a vague formless society, they can live through and experience as citizens in a city" (Mumford 1937, 60).

As a collection of individuals, we need some opportunity for integration of the individual into the whole. The city hall plaza, as a collective identifier, as a space owned by all citizens, as a space which refers most closely with our democratic roots can try to achieve this reintegration into the whole, and grant us the sense that together we are not individuals, but citizens.

Questions for Further Consideration

Had I more time to explore this topic, there are several questions that I would love to investigate further. Some might be the size of a thesis, others might be questions that would take a lifetime to answer.

Some of these questions are:

- What role does participation play in the end design of a city hall plaza?
- What scale is "civic"?
- Is public life alive or dead?
- What is the nature of public space? and What is good public space?
- What is the form of democracy?
- How does a historic form maintain its relevance in a changing society?
- How does a city sustain its values within the built form over time?
- When it already exists, what is the form that promotes democratic participation?

I would also love to delve deeper into some of the dichotomies raised, specifically the context of design and implementation:

- How can a plaza fit several thousand people comfortably one day, and a handful of people comfortably the next?
- How can a plaza be a public space shared by a whole city and support heterogenous interactions, while still being a comfortable place?
- What is the ideal model for public-private partnerships to support the heterogeny of a city hall plaza?

None of these questions are easily answered, but moving forward, I think it would be appealing to do both a broader, shallower study of many city hall plazas across the US to try to determine some commonalities, as well as a deeper study of one or more plazas. Both of these would seem to reveal facets not discovered through this research.

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