

Toward a return of the public place: an American survey

The Pavilion, Washington, D. C.,
by Benjamin Thompson &
Associates and Arthur Cotton
Moore/Associates.

By James Sanders

"The open piazza is seldom appropriate for an American city today. . . . The piazza, in fact, is 'un-American.' Americans feel uncomfortable sitting in a square: they should be working at the office or home with the family looking at television, or perhaps at the bowling alley." Robert Venturi wrote these words in 1965 to explain why his firm didn't adopt an open plaza approach for their competition entry to Boston's Copley Square. The problem of most American cities, he said, was not that they lacked sufficient open space, but that they had *too much*.

It was heresy, pure and simple. At least for architects. To suggest that they might be engaged in a flurry of building plazas for an American public that neither wanted nor needed them was to challenge a cherished axiom of modern architecture and planning. But if provocative to architects, it was to most other social observers simply the common wisdom of the times: America was becoming a private affair, a society, in John Kenneth Galbraith's words, of "private affluence and public squalor." As critics noted about the time Pennsylvania Station's Doric columns came crashing down, our public vision was becoming fairly impoverished. The emerging American was packed into automobiles and suburban homes, entertained by television and indoor activities from nightclubs to bowling. America seemed to be evolving into the first society in history to jettison the need for an architecture of public space.

It was only the architects themselves who, fresh from their trips to Italy, kept proposing those endless piazzas, replete with cafés, fountains and flowers—a fantasy of a communal social life where Americans would casually interact and gather in broad public spaces. In practice, the results kept emerging as cheerless, windswept expanses of concrete and scraggly trees. And Venturi was right: however popular piazza-life was in Italy, France, or the rest of the world, Americans seemed to have no problem avoiding these forlorn places. Perhaps sitting in a square was simply "un-American."

Could we ever really have thought that way, even momentarily? It was only two decades ago, yet it now seems like a

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bygone vision of America. Today, the nation bulges with dozens, even hundreds, of new public gathering places. In city after city, the same scene is repeated:

The fountains gush. The crowds throng. The elegant umbrella tables and chairs scrape against the brick-paved floor. Jugglers and mimes woo the crowd away from a brass trio's Bach. Here a woman is dazzled by chrysanthemums; there two old friends have just run into each other; at the next table, a love affair may be starting. Paris? Milan? No, a "place" in Santa Monica. A "galleria" in midtown Manhattan. An "atrium" in Troy, New York. A "market" in Baltimore. A "park" in Georgetown. Above the din of the crowds may be open sky or glass skylights, escalators or the cornice of an historic market building, tiers of shops or corporate offices.

These innumerable new spaces are changing America. They have already changed the traditional perception of Americans as unwilling to demand or support an urbane lifestyle of café-sitting and *il dolce far niente*. And they are in the process of redefining once-firm categories of social life and architecture. The lines between what is urban and what is suburban, the distinction between what is public space and what is private, have begun to blur. But so pervasive are these new projects, and so ingrained have they become in American life, that it seems necessary to re-evaluate our traditional concepts in their light.

If we have not yet done so, it is in part because this explosion of new spaces has come so quickly, and in part because it was so unexpected. Remember when the Ford Foundation's headquarters opened in New York just 18 years ago? Its

high, glazed atrium was treated at the time as an extraordinary anomaly, a striking anachronism that, indeed, only an institution as wealthy as the Ford Foundation might underwrite. We were told to look long and hard at that 12-story interior space, for in our time we might never see its like again.

Or recall when in 1972, Peter Blake, writing in *Architectural Forum*, felt the need to adopt his most characteristic naughty-boy irony in praising the just-completed Walt Disney World as "perhaps the most interesting new town in America." He truly felt there was much for architects to learn from its builders' skill in creating popular, charming, lively, pedestrian-oriented environments, but it seemed essential to plant tongue firmly in cheek. After all, what value would a serious modern architect see in its 19th-century-inspired, historically referential streetfronts, festooned with such "period" details as ornate, re-cast lampposts? Other than the cartoon wizard, who would ever build in such a manner?

In a few short years, a remarkable convergence of new retailing formulas, the loosening grip of modernism, and an increasingly sophisticated urbanism (itself being patiently re-learned after the sweeping reductionism of the modern movement) has created new building types—and new social phenomena—to be found in almost every city in the nation.

Public versus private spaces

The issues these spaces raise are complex. To some observers, many of the new downtown malls, markets, and atria represent the suburbanization of the city, the importation of a successful commercial formula to an urban

setting. The word "suburban" here takes a dark undertone: artificial, homogenous. Others counter by pointing to the grand 19th-century tradition of glazed commercial spaces in cities, precedent that rests firmly in the pantheon of urbanism.

An even more profound question lies in these places' ambiguous status as "public" space. These are not the traditional open piazzas and town squares, built and kept up by the state, open to all, held in the public trust, and devoid of commercial activity. But they are, in practice, serving as "public" spaces for the large numbers of people who eagerly flock to them as meeting spots, locations in which to "see and be seen," and, particularly among young people, as common ground for passing time with one's peers. Meanwhile, the municipal and state governments to which Americans historically have turned in this century for the provision of parks, squares, and plazas find themselves hunkering down for a long period of fiscal austerity, the difficulties ahead seen largely in maintaining existing facilities, much less in building ambitious new ones.

So the society has turned to the private sector for the creation of these new "public" spaces, to the retailers, developers, and corporations who, for their own economic return, are creating them in record numbers, often as the centerpieces for larger office, shopping, or housing efforts. To some, this represents an irreconcilable contradiction: spaces cannot be "public" if they are privately sponsored and controlled. To others, there is a lesson in their success: well-maintained, attractive, and secure, they offer the basic attractions provided in the past by parks and squares. Efforts to restore traditional public spaces might learn from elements of these new, privately sponsored projects.

And is it necessarily the sponsorship of a place that determines whether or not it is perceived as "public"? Over the last half-century, we have taken for granted that government will provide plazas and squares for the public. It was not always so: in the 19th century, when government took a smaller role in society, many "public" places, from beach resorts to gallerias to pleasure gardens, were in fact built by private entrepreneurs and businessmen. But they *looked* public. They *felt* public. Their private sponsorship did not prevent them from becoming focal points for their cities, widely popular and civic-spirited. Can we rediscover the attributes of their design and use that made them perceived that way, so that their special character, their "publicness," re-emerge in today's efforts?

*Galleria Vittorio Emanuele,
Milan, by Giuseppe Mengoni,
1865-75.*

Malls and arcades:

An historical overview

Looking back on our own recent history, one can see that an early blurring of the lines between city and suburb, public and private, occurred around 1956. In that year, the opening of Victor Gruen's Southdale Center in suburban Minneapolis created a new phenomenon. Gruen placed a partially glazed roof over the common space of a shopping center and filled the now-climate-controlled area with a café, sculpture, murals, fountains, exhibitions, and seating. "Two-level Southdale is more like downtown than downtown itself," headlined *Architectural Forum's* review, immediately asserting the ambiguity Southdale and its countless imitators would sustain.

Here were some of the most precious elements of urbanism—worthy of an Italian town itself—brought to the middle of a highway suburb. In 1956, Southdale probably exceeded the urban amenity available in many American cities, few of which at that time could boast plazas with open-air cafés and exhibitions. Here, under glass, was a new "street" and "plaza" life. As Southdale's progeny began to multiply, the amenities blossomed ambitiously; by the late 1960s, the "malls" (as they were now called) encompassed performance areas, spectacular floral displays, exotic trees, and fountains of a complexity not seen since Piranesi's day. And they could be found everywhere.

For the developer, whatever sense of "urbanity" these spaces may have had was secondary. In enclosing the space of a shopping center, he had created an all-weather facility where consumers, indifferent to climate or season, would be encouraged to linger—and shop. The fountains, cafés, and the rest became merely the tools by which patrons would be encouraged first to come, then to spend the day. But for the teenagers or young mothers who now built their social life around the mall, it could be seen as serving much of the communal function offered by the traditional town square or European piazza.

The emerging ambiguity between city and suburb posed by the malls was sharply heightened by the next step: the importation of the mall concept, by now a proven retail success, into the downtowns of older cities, usually by redevelopment agencies eager to see center cities revived by any means possible. Such early downtown malls as Water Tower Place in Chicago bore a striking resemblance to some of the better-class suburban antecedents: they were glossy affairs in polished metals and stone that in deference to the price of land in central cities



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took on a more vertical cast. The multi-acre parking lot became the multi-story parking garage, the atria became higher and narrower, and the amenities now extravagantly encompassed vertical circulation, with exposed-cab, glitter-lit elevators gliding down into gurgling pools of water.

Here the irony built upon itself: a compressed microcosm of "urbanity," sitting in the middle of an urban center, yet somehow not an urban phenomenon at all. Although *in* the city, it did not seem to be *of* it. Only grudging connection, if any, was generally provided to the traditional, sometimes aging downtown streets of department stores and small shops; instead, these downtown malls turned themselves inward, their shopfronts facing the courts, all the fun tucked inside. To the old, real city, they reverted to their suburban roots and presented mostly blank walls, four and five stories high, punctuated only by the oversized signs of the major department stores within.

It seemed obvious to many that it was simply the inward focus and homogenous commercialism of these malls that denied them any chance of a true urbanity. But the reality was more complex. Almost a century ago, in the late 19th century, an urban form much like

the downtown mall flourished in European and American cities. Like the mall, it was inwardly focused. Like the mall, it was built around shopping. Like the mall, it was generally developed all at once, not incrementally and "naturally." It was the arcade. Today, we remember it as one of the glories of the industrial city, and a singularly urbane phenomenon.

From its beginnings in Paris in the 1810s to its triumphant crest in Milan, Berlin, Naples, and Cleveland in the 1870s, the arcade formula remained remarkably constant: a linear, multi-story, glazed-roof space that connected existing streets and that was lined with shops and offices. Accessible to adjacent thoroughfares through high, open archways, the arcades pulled street life into their passages and provided a rain-protected, ornately decorated, and naturally lit shopping environment. Generally built by private entrepreneurs (sometimes with condemnation assistance from municipal governments), they contained a wide variety of shops and cafés, and often became their cities' beloved social centers. One American visitor, Mark Twain, was fond of Milan's great Galleria Vittorio Emanuele and wrote of it as "roofed over with glass at a great height, the pavements all of smooth

and variegated marble, arranged in tasteful patterns—little tables all over these marble streets, people sitting at them, eating, drinking, or smoking—crowds of other people strolling by—such is the Arcade. I should like to live in it all my life."

Other people strolling by. Twain, at once, touched the heart of the matter, why the Milan Galleria is essentially an urban place, and Water Tower Place, despite its North Michigan Avenue address, essentially a suburban one. At its root, the essence of a suburban place (no matter what its location or how many cafés it boasts) is that it is conceptually a point in space, discontinuous from all else. People drive to it, park, use it, get back in their cars, and drive away. Those using the mall make a deliberate decision to do so; no one is "just passing through" to get somewhere else. The malls remain detached from all else around them. Their use, in a word, is conscious.

A street, by contrast and almost by definition, is a place to come to and use consciously, but is also a connector between two or more other places. Some people may have made a special trip to use the street's facilities, but others are just passing through to get somewhere else. It is the combination of conscious and casual use of the street that makes for its complex web of interactions and possibilities. With no casual use, is it any wonder that a mall, despite its fountains, trees, and cafés, might somehow feel "artificial"?

The men who built the arcades knew they would not succeed as cul-de-sacs. They had to serve as connectors, as short-cuts, and the arcades always linked two or more already busy streets—or, as in Milan, two important city resources (the Cathedral and La Scala). It was simply good retail sense, and it made the arcades function, as Twain noted, just like streets.

The arcade updated

But the arcades were more than just connectors. Through their architecture they spoke to the general public as places that were welcoming and civic, and as such they still have several critical lessons to teach us.

In New York during the 1970s, city planners turned to the old arcades as a prototype for new "covered pedestrian spaces" that would largely supersede the often underused open-air plazas the city had been encouraging since the early 1960s. Like those earlier plazas, new covered spaces would be brought about by a provision of the zoning resolution that allowed developers who constructed these spaces in their buildings to exceed the standard height and bulk

Left: The Cleveland Arcade, 1888-90, by John M. Eisenmann and George H. Smith.

Right: Entrance to Park Avenue Plaza, New York City, by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

limitations for their zoning district. In some cases, as much as 20 per cent more floor space might be added—a gold mine of additional income for the developer given the high cost of Manhattan land. The inevitable loss of sunlight, the extra shadows, and the increase in density and congestion created by these much taller buildings would be offset, it was felt, by the amenity gained through the private construction of the new spaces.

From the outset, and to their credit, the planners recognized that a key component of these spaces' success was their function as connectors, and they mandated at least two entrances on different streets. After early disappointments, the concept finally achieved success with Citicorp Center's atrium (Hugh Stubbins & Associates), which opened in 1978. Although its pedestrian pathways were convoluted, its numerous entrances to surrounding streets (and a link to a subway station) encouraged cross-circulation. Its retailing concept addressed its urban location by stressing food outlets over durable goods shops (the reverse of the suburban mall's mix) and provided it with a sturdy and even complex pattern of use. New York, claimed supporters of Citicorp, now had a new "indoor town square" at no (direct) cost to the city. And it was seen as the harbinger of many more such spaces which, as the city's office market brightened, were suddenly on the drawing boards.

But a glance at the sleek, cool, corporate tiers of stainless steel that defined the architectural character of Citicorp's atrium could quickly lead an observer to wonder just how truly "public" the place was. And the same question arose even more strongly with two other galleria spaces in office towers in midtown Manhattan—Olympic Tower and Park Avenue Plaza—designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Both of these gallerias, like Citicorp, were fully enclosed, and both served as their buildings' lobbies as well as bonusable "covered pedestrian spaces." The street entrances of both spaces consisted of revolving doors set into the tinted glass curtain walls employed in the towers above. Unlike the City's regulation for "through-block arcades," which were required to be open to the air at either end (in the manner of the European arcades), these "covered pedestrian spaces" could be climate-controlled. And after technical problems emerged in the earliest ones (cold winter air, it was said, was being tunneled into the buildings' interiors and up their elevator shafts, wreaking havoc with the heating systems), the



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mandated size of the entrances was allowed to shrink and take the form of revolving doors. In allowing these spaces to be enclosed, the City was immediately and profoundly altering their nature. Conceived as "super-streets," these spaces were becoming "super-lobbies."

But enclosure was only part of the problem. The Department of City Planning learned, after suffering the first few barren examples, that it was necessary to fill these places with amenities and was soon strictly supervising the number and location of tables, chairs, trees, and other public attractions. It also regulated the minimum height and breadth of the spaces and even the "transparency" of the street walls. But it chose to exercise no direct control over architectural style.

So SOM was free to employ its standard vocabulary of glass curtain walls and revolving doors for the entrances to these covered pedestrian spaces. In doing so, the architects, whether intentionally or not, were sending out a clear message to the general public. Buildings have meaning. To most people, glass-and-steel curtain walls and revolving doors at the base of a building mean "corporate office building," not "public place." The office building does not necessarily seem welcoming to everyone; even those for whom it is welcoming tend to use it differently than they would a public space. To some, the message of these building entrances (even if unwitting) was "do not come in unless you have business here." Many people didn't even realize these places were open to the public. Yet all citizens were carrying the burden of lost light and increased congestion caused by the zoning bonus arrangement.

The semiology of public spaces: the message of architecture
That objects, like buildings, can send out "messages," especially ones not intended by the designers, is an idea much explored by semiologists. Although semiology's proponents (mostly French philosophers and critics) are notorious for their dense and intimidating prose, their basic concept is quite simple: that objects or texts can be understood as signs and sign-systems. It is an approach with wide application in architecture—especially public architecture—where the great diversity of users includes many with no special interest in the history or theory of architecture. The 19th-century arcades, we now know, exhibited through their architecture an effective and widely understood *language* of gestures that gave them an unambiguously public character. Their public language transcended the fact of their private sponsorship and retail orientation.

Today, as we embark on a new era in which communal gathering spaces will be not solely, or even mostly, built by the government, it seems incumbent upon us to learn that language or "code-system," and how to adapt it to our social needs and technological resources. Without that knowledge, we will be forced to resort to measures like those now mandated by the New York City Planning Department to ensure public use: prominent signs and graphic symbols indicating that the atria and gallerias are open to the public. The English language must be used because the architectural language has failed. The entrance to Milan's Galleria, it should be noted, needs no sign proclaiming "Open to the Public from 7 a. m. to 10 p. m."

How did the 19th-century arcades achieve their unambiguously civic character, their "public-ness?" Their first step was in being climatically continuous with the outside world, with clear, multi-story openings; the transition from street to arcade became gradual, the dividing line between inside and outside indistinct. For their interiors, the arcades often simply borrowed the pre-existing and well-understood language of classicism, which had over the centuries come to be associated with governmental, or at least institutional, structures. The triumphal arch that forms the entrance to Milan's Galleria carried a clear message of welcoming passage for large groups of people. The elaborately detailed interior walls, comprising classical arches, pilasters, columns, and ornament, carried the character of the exterior facades of important buildings, making the linear space between them, by obvious extension, feel like an important street. Together, the effect of the inviting entrances and the "outdoor" architecture of the interior walls made the arcades seem like broad thoroughfares—marble-paved, vehicle-free, and filled with cafés and trees.

Many of the arcades, though, did not use classical stonework. Toward the end of the 19th century, the arcades turned increasingly to the cast-iron structural systems pioneered by Joseph Paxton in his 1851 Crystal Palace outside London. These iron gallerias (Cleveland's spectacular Arcade is the best American example) could not be said to have an interior "facade" at all. Instead, an openwork of cast-iron balconies, galleries, and columns culminated in the soaring iron arches and trusses vaulting the main passage and supporting the glass roof that kept rain out and let daylight in. While classically influenced in some of their small details, these inventive interiors cannot be said to have borrowed from a pre-existing language of public buildings, as did the stone facades of Milan, Berlin, and elsewhere. These cast-iron interiors boasted, in fact, a new architectural language, yet they, too, carried an unambiguously "civic" character. What was their secret?

The answer may be found in their great, arching, glassy roofs, whose daring engineering was put to work in vaulting the tops of nearly all the arcades, including those otherwise built of stone. The trusses and skylights had an unmistakable grandeur. They were sweeping, generous gestures. By their very nature and purpose, they required a broad scale that encompassed figuratively as well as literally the entire pedestrian realm. Their simple forms, elegantly

Left: The IBM Garden Plaza, New York City, by Edward Larrabee Barnes Associates.

Right: Trump Tower Atrium, New York City, by Swanke Hayden Connell Architects.

embellished, spoke of a sensibility larger than that of the domestic house or individual shop. So strong was the sense of civic celebration and public character provided by the great roofs and their supporting iron and stone galleries that the arcades could transcend the near-chaos of signage and merchandise that (particularly in Paris) rapidly engulfed the lower floors.

Ironically, present-day signage and displays are generally far more strictly regulated, but the over-all effect still seems *less* public than the old arcades, where signage, in whatever quantity, was held in place and balanced by a strong civic framework of architecture and vaulting that was as non-commercial as a cathedral's.

Public spaces in New York: IBM and Trump Tower as case studies

Today, as both the new glazed atria and open-air projects multiply, the elements of a new public language are beginning to emerge. Spaces are being routinely outfitted with the essential amenities—seating, planting, fountains, food service—that allow them to serve as gathering places. In some cases, ingenious technical solutions are being found for long-standing climatic, maintenance, and mechanical problems. But the architecture of these places still generally fails to recognize the importance of a building's "language" in sending out the right messages—those that would make them be perceived as public and would let them fulfill their potential as society's focal points, not just retail facilities or corporate symbols. One must recognize the distinct possibility that for some of these new spaces, not being viewed as public may be desirable, but for others, especially those built in return for zoning bonuses or with public aid, there is a responsibility to feel welcoming and civic. City planners should go beyond such issues as the number of trees and chairs and explore how architecture can serve as a "sign" as clearly as—and considerably more effectively than—a printed notice.

The new IBM Garden Plaza in midtown Manhattan, situated at the base of that corporation's new 43-story office tower, was developed as part of a zoning bonus arrangement and offers the state-of-the-art in the provision of activities and balance of uses—achieved through its ample number of entrances and the genuinely enthusiastic offering of such amenities as plenty of free public seating, a café, performances, landscaping, a museum, even a computer-driven cultural information center.



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But the architectural language of the place—Edward Larrabee Barnes's slick, late modernism, expressed in a white-pipe space-frame and the tower's gray-green bands of glass and polished granite—speaks a code-system of corporate elegance, not civic celebration. The entrances are particularly ironic: Barnes's firm has found a superb technical solution to the recurrent problem with the climate of the Northeast, where cold winters and hot, humid summers have seemed to mandate that atria be sealed and heated or air-conditioned. IBM's Garden Plaza, climatically cushioned by receiving a portion of the tower's filtered air on its out-cycle, can be extensively opened to the outside on most days by huge, 33-foot-high glass doors which slide to one side, creating a clear, open passage that blends inside and outside almost imperceptibly.

But the technical finesse of these entrances is undercut by the architecture. Recessed from the street and given the same glass-and-steel expression as the rest of the atrium, the entrances are difficult to find and convey little more excitement or grandeur of passage than a set of revolving doors would. So understated are they that in one view, a closed-circuit security camera takes on the prominence of an ornamental bracket, the only interruption in the building's smooth skin.

Sixty-eight feet up, the atrium's huge trusses create impressive clear spans, but there is no sense of grandeur in their design either, no sweeping, generous gesture that might create a sense of uplift and underscore the excitement of this great communal space in the heart of the city. If possible, the regular, sawtooth trusses seem almost



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prosaic, to be appreciated more by engineers than the general public. The problem is not that the Garden Plaza isn't handsome, which it is, but that its architecture, called upon to speak eloquently to the public, is almost mute.

At the nearby Trump Tower Atrium by Swanke Hayden Connell, also created as a trade-off for a zoning bonus, a different code-system emerges—here not that of the corporate office building, but that of the modern retail outlet, the stylish boutique, or fashionable department store. Interestingly, like most of the code-systems of modern buildings, Trump's language emerges not out of what was traditionally considered "style" (details, proportion, systems of ornament), but from certain combinations of materials and surfaces. The "modern-retail" code-system, now to be found from Rodeo Drive to the Via Veneto, is achieved with quality sheet metals (such as bronze) brought to a high polish, extensive areas of float glass, veneers of expensive stone (such as veined Italian marble), and backlit metal and acrylic signage, all served up under arrays of brilliant track-lights and PAR lamps. At the Trump atrium this combination is stretched across the interior of a tall space which, despite its provision of required public amenities, still feels like something of a private preserve for prosperous customers.

Unlike IBM, the Trump Tower atrium, an entirely indoor space, promotes no indistinction between inside and outside. Its entrance along Fifth Avenue is prominently marked and suggestive, at least in scale, of a large space within. (Also unlike IBM, one should note, Trump's design discourages non-specific use by the general public.

There is no place to sit down, except in restaurants, and the only real activity within the atrium is high-priced shopping.) Trump Tower's atrium, a pink marble cocoon, has a protected, insulated quality that is a desirable feature for its managers and tenants. As in so many of these new spaces, it is precisely the ability to offer a level of security and control far in excess of that found on a street or in a public park that underlines its popularity with a middle-class public, eager to use the city but only if assured of comfort and safety. It is no coincidence that the popularity of these spaces has risen in direct correlation to the decline in the use of public parks and squares, which are perceived by many as suffering a range of social ills, from crime to illegitimate use (drug-selling, con games) to being a dumping ground for indigents.

Some national examples

As a primarily retail-oriented space, Trump Tower is more typical of the majority of new atria around the country than IBM's Garden Plaza, which serves as a vessel of corporate prestige. What both evidence (Trump Tower more than IBM) is the failure to transcend through their architecture what might be considered their "ulterior motives" (cash sales, business good will, and extra revenue from additional upper floors) and become, as the old arcades often did, true centers of civic life. It is a lack they share with many atria and malls in other cities, where the issue of "public-ness" remains unresolved, even as qualities of civic grandeur are being approached from a variety of directions.

In Georgetown, a three-level mall dubbed Georgetown Park reverts to a 19th-century historicism, resulting in a delightful and charming space that nonetheless seems somehow privatized, its robust original architectural sources losing their sense of civic grandeur in the process of being brought up to date. Also in Washington, a three-story market called The Pavilion (Arthur Cotton Moore/Associates and Benjamin Thompson & Associates) sits at the base of a magnificent 19th-century post-office atrium and finds a borrowed grandeur in the vast volume of the old space, its Romanesque Revival tiers, and its giant trusses. Recalling images of bustling medieval villages huddling at the foot of ruined Roman aqueducts, it disturbingly hints that true civic grandeur may belong to another culture, one that we, like the medievals contemplating the Roman arches, only partially understand, even as we take advantage of it. And in Philadelphia, a new series of galleries (Bower Lewis Thrower/

Top: South Street Seaport, New York City, by Benjamin Thompson & Associates; Beyer Blinder Belle; and Jan Hird Pokorny. Bottom: Harborplace, Baltimore, by Benjamin Thompson & Associates.

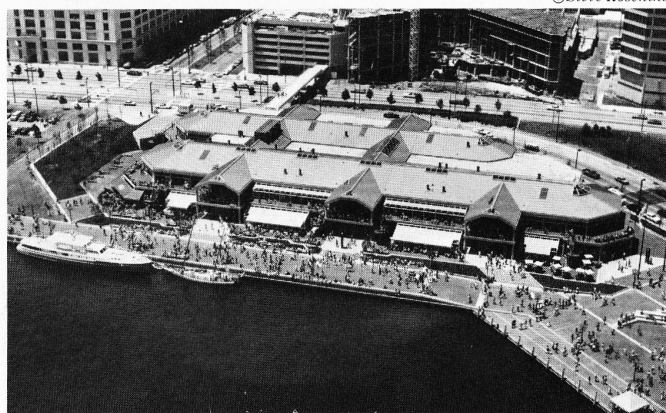
Architects) stretches four blocks and encompasses three department stores. The development rests atop a vast new transit complex of subways and suburban trains, taking its cue from the spirit of the transportation facilities below: clean, handsome, and efficient. Although it cannot be said to have yet achieved a truly civic grandeur, its lively, pleasantly plaza-like spaces *do* feel public, even if more like a train station than a park.

Notwithstanding their lack of civic grandeur, these new spaces are solving many of the stubborn, pragmatic problems of security, climate control, and maintenance that have previously driven a wedge between economic and real-estate practicality and urban graciousness. This crop of spaces may be on the edge of a new generation that will effectively employ architecture to reinforce the strides made in turning our conception of public space inside-out: creating civic places at the *inside* of buildings.

Open-air public spaces

Clearly, it has been those new spaces under glass roofs—the atria and the gallerias—that have been the most singular addition to the nation's inventory of public spaces. But equally significant changes have been occurring in the open air. Our conception of outdoor public space is being transformed by developments emerging under a variety of sponsorships and for a variety of purposes. Distinct responses to distinct conditions are creating, ironically, what is more or less a single new direction for American open space.

From civic groups and local development corporations have come a new approach to dealing with traditional open spaces, such as parks and plazas, which have slipped into decay and disuse by a public intimidated by illegitimate activities such as drug-selling. These spaces are being reclaimed through the introduction of coordinated new amenities, many of them "commercial" vending stalls and concessions designed to draw in a pedestrian population and stabilize the use of a place. Elsewhere, the opposite is happening: open space is being carefully injected into retail offerings. The market projects of The Rouse Corporation, for example, have transfigured the retail world through their placement in historic city centers and by the introduction of large open spaces as integral elements of their plans. These open spaces have, in fact, become attractions in themselves, filled with shops, performance areas, and other amenities that offer the promise of a continuous civic festival.



So from at least two distinct sources has come a convergence. American open spaces are becoming more complex in the range of activities they encourage, and the traditionally sharp distinctions between retail use and non-commercial park activities are blurring. It has become accepted that a public open space can have, and may need to have, both in order to remain safe, well-maintained, and welcoming. What has become critical is the search for a balance between the two realms, public and commercial, to ensure the public realm from dominance by the commercial. At Rouse's South Street Seaport, it is not clear that this goal has been achieved.

A glance at the pedestrianized Fulton Street, the main open space of South Street Seaport, shows the strides made by Benjamin Thompson & Associates, Beyer Blinder Belle, and Jan Hird Pokorny in the artful filling of space with activities and amenities, and in the enrichment of that space with design elements ranging in scale from the largest gestures to (and this is the unusual part) the smallest signage, displays, and furniture. They have restored to the design of open space the quality of decision-making at a range of scales that was almost completely lost in the modernist era, when open

spaces, even if striking in their large moves, were in their details uninspired at best, brutal at worst.

If Fulton Street nonetheless fails to feel fully public, the fault may be not with the architecture so much as the crush of commercial activity brought on by the very density of retail use. All other activities, from the performances to simply sitting and resting, seemed subsumed under the crush of people buying or about to buy. It may in fact be Fulton Street's traditional two-sided shopping (the element of the project which to many observers seems to lock it most comfortably into the city's matrix) that creates its frenetic atmosphere. With traffic banned, vending pulled into the street's center, and its cul-de-sac location at the water's edge, the eye cannot avoid retail activity. Shopping is everywhere. Despite the mimes, banners and benches, the balance seems missing.

As the Seaport expands onto its pier pavilion and the crowds on Fulton Street are given a destination, the balance may re-establish itself. And if the Rouse project in Baltimore, called Harborplace, is any indication, new public space around the Seaport's pier pavilion may be far more successful. For it is at Harborplace that the balance between retail activity and passive recreation

seems to have been achieved gracefully and almost effortlessly. Designed by Benjamin Thompson & Associates, the project comprises a series of broad esplanades located along the water's edge and fronted by two new market pavilions. Along the promenades one is afforded the best of both worlds. To one side a glittering array of restaurants, cafés and shops spills down to the walks in a series of terraces and balconies. They focus outward, to the other realm: the Harbor, with its historic ships, aquarium, and ever-changing reflections. A variety of pleasures is provided for: sitting on a promenade watching the slow arcs of a gull through the rigging of a sailing ship, or turning to the daytime bustle—or evening glow—of a set of elegant shops and restaurants, and feeling that one is in the center of things.

The broad promenades are unquestionably a significant addition to the public spaces of the city. A woman reads, her back against a bollard; a couple dangles its feet over the side and speaks quietly; the captain and first mate of a pleasure boat review charts. No purchases are required; everyone is welcome. From the upper decks looking down they may seem a study in solitude, but from the promenade level, looking back at the pavilions, one is aware that they, too, have been drawn here in some undefinable way by the liveliness of the market.

Here is retail space, then, activating public space as only it can do: drawing people, energizing and enlivening the area, making the space in front of it seem comfortable and well-maintained, offering the jostle of humanity that answers a deep need for communality. And here is the public realm, giving relief and a sense of expansiveness to the retail parts of the project, providing, as only it can, a brief respite from the pressure of urban life. The balance between commerce and recreation, between public and private, is truly achieved, and both profit from the mixing.

At open-air markets and reclaimed urban parks, at retail malls and corporate atria, an American public is demonstrating its pleasure in communal gathering places that mix what have been heretofore disparate pursuits. They can sit at tableside, enjoying drinks, and watch the passing parade, or, in turn, be one of those strolling past the cafés, passing through on their way elsewhere. The nation is moving toward new and complex conceptions of public space and public life. Soon, we may no longer have to travel to Milan to find places where we, too, may join with Twain in saying, "I should like to live there all my life."