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Abstract
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The Minneapolis Federal Courthouse Plaza: Meaning and Identity

Heidi Hohmann

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The Federal Courthouse Plaza in Minneapolis might be considered a ‘run-of-the-mill’ project for Martha Schwartz. Critically acclaimed, it uses a minimalist design vocabulary, innovates with new materials, and expands on theoretical ideas she has previously explored. Designed and constructed for the Government Services Administration (GSA), the plaza comprises half a block at the base of the Federal Courthouse designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox. Though the plaza is clearly intended to be the mediating space in the dialogue between the lively, late Modernist Courthouse to the north and the heavy, Richardsonian Romanesque City Hall to the south, the conversation extends to the surrounding urban context, which is tall and dense enough to make the plaza seem something of a surprise opening in the urban fabric.

Yet the dominant spatial relationship is that between the intimately connected plaza and courthouse. The curving façade of the building embraces the open plaza in a defining architectural move, and the plaza’s striped paving takes its cues from the building. The paved beige field matches the limestone building, and the stripes echo the rhythm and pattern of the building’s vertical fenestration. The stripes almost seem to climb up the building walls, a move recalling Schwartz’s early project “Limed Parterre with Skywriter,” in the Radcliffe quadrangle at Harvard. In this temporary project, stripes served to visually reconnect Moors Hall to the lawn from which it had been severed by the building’s renovation. The Federal Courthouse Plaza (FCP) similarly uses stripes to strengthen the unification between façade and ground plane.

The FCP plays some other classic formal games seen in Schwartz’s earlier works. Like the King County Jail Plaza (1988), the FCP’s ground plane has been made “important and taut so that the objects sitting upon it are sitting in a surreal world.” This time, however, the objects are a field of oblong grassy mounds oriented 30 degrees off the axis of the building and the urban grid. The canting of the field, combined with the streamlined shape of the mounds, strongly suggests motion against the grain of both city and striping. As a result, the design is less static than many of Schwartz’s previous overlays, such as the Rio Shopping Mall, Necco Garden, or Center for Innovative Technology. Although not as complex conceptually as Todos Santos Plaza, the design is instead characterized by a cool simplicity. The plaza might be considered a Frankensteinian descendant of Peter Walker’s Tanner Fountain, writ large and sans preciousness, in which the fountain’s rocks, enlarged and geologically transformed, have been let loose from their rigid circle to slouch, slug-like, toward the city on some...
horrifying mission. Considered this way, the plaza is practically sublime.

The simple palette of elements efficiently solves the requisite design “problems.” The mounds direct circulation and attention toward the building entrance, and provide planting space above the parking garage located just a few inches below the plaza surface. The purported maintenance problems of the grass on the steep Styrofoam slopes seem to be more a result of laziness and a lack of imagination rather than an insurmountable design “flaw.” Trim rectangular stone bollards unobtrusively control circulation along the streets. A circular area of oblong granite pavers defines a zone for Tom Otterness’s sculpture “Rockman” (1999) and integrates the form of the ventilation system grates into the ground plane. The concrete pavers, an apparent budgetary compromise, have, according to the GSA, turned out to be a happy accident of security enhancement in our age of terrorism. Because they crack under significant loads, they prevent vehicles containing explosives from getting close enough to the building to destroy it.

There are a few design issues to quibble about. Other critics have decried the dearth of shade on the plaza, and there’s been much ballyhoo about the lack of places to sit and eat lunch within William Whyte’s parameters. This latter concern, however, seems a petty criticism. Until global warming kicks in, Minnesota’s climate precludes outdoor lunching in any plaza much of the year. Other design clinkers include the exposed aggregate, off-the-shelf trash receptacles. The Otterness sculpture, simultaneously cute and creepy in a Steven King kind of way, similarly seems misplaced in this environment.

Though Otterness’ work “The Real World” (1992) seems appropriate in New York’s Rockefeller Park, where its playful attitude is clearly directed toward children, here, its humor seems placed simply to make an abstruse landscape more palatable and accessible to the general public.

But, overall, the Federal Courthouse Plaza is an eye-catching and thought-provoking package. Placed in the middle of a grid of ordinary buildings in an average Midwestern burg, it is a little shocking, disorienting and alienating. It does, in this way, effect Schwartz’s usual goal of “mak[ing] the landscape visible to those who usually don’t see it.” But if the plaza makes people stop and think about landscape, the question is, what does it make them think about? Schwartz is usually reticent on this question when it comes to individual works. However, it is a question worth examining.

Contrary to popular belief, the FCP is not a ‘one-liner’ design. For example, if as critic Elizabeth Meyer suggests, Schwartz, through her built work, is “highlight[ing] the conceptual structures through which we define our discipline...throw[ing] light on
current limits," one reading of the design might be as a critique of the landscape architecture profession's use of landform. Based on her 1990 essay "Landscape and Common Culture Since Modernism," the genesis of the idea for the mounds at the FCP might have occurred much earlier than its commission. In this article, Schwartz describes the profession as hopelessly mired in eighteenth century conceptions of landscape:

(W)e must now shed our romance with our wilderness heritage and the English landscape in order to deal effectively with our expanding urban- and suburbanization. The nostalgia for the (imagined) English countryside...has prevented us from seeing our landscape as it truly is and inhibited the evolution of an appropriate landscape approach to urbanization. We shake our heads in collective disgust at the ugliness of our man-made environments, and yet do little to fully consider the scope of the problem or its possible solution. To improve the visual blight, we place diminutive mounds...at the bases of our buildings. Unthinkingly, we dredge up the rolling English countryside like a universal balm, without questioning its appropriateness or viability in today's environment (Italics mine).

In the context of this writing, the intentional and self-conscious siting of the "diminutive mounds" at the base of the Federal Courthouse can be read as a witty commentary on the profession's uncritical use of berms and arbitrary amoeboid land forms to disguise built form by recalling a mythological landscape of the past. It is, in the words of Meyer, "a good garden joke" for those landscape architects who "know their history well enough."

Unfortunately, the public, whom the landscape architecture profession has inured to the dreaded berm, doesn't get the joke. But, as Schwartz has indicated, the design was intended to be "left...open so that people could make their own interpretation." Another interpretation of the design, a simplistic one in which the plaza's elements are inscribed with cultural and natural symbolism, is prescribed in Schwartz's monograph:

Earth mounds and logs, elements of Minnesota's cultural and natural history, are the plaza's symbolic and sculptural elements. These components symbolize both the natural landscape and man's manipulation of it for his own purposes.

The mounds are intended to evoke a memory of geologic and cultural forms; they might suggest a field of glacial drumlins, a stylized hill region, or like a Japanese garden, a landscape that allows a dual reading of scale—a range of mountains, or a low field of mounds. Rising to a height of seven feet, the tear-shaped mounds are planted with jack-
pine, a small, stunted pioneer species common in Minnesota's boreal forest. The logs, evocative of the great timber forests that attracted immigrants and provided the basis for the local economy, tell a similar story. The association of timber with Minnesota speaks to the heart of Minnesotans' collective memory.

This symbolic meaning, in which the plaza's elements each represent some aspect of Minnesota, has become the dominant reading of the landscape, both locally and nationally. An area journalist has named the plaza "drumlin park," and the architectural press has played up the plaza's "strong emotive impact on the city's inhabitants" and the way it "brings the bleak intensity of Minnesota's rural landscape into the heart of the city." It is not clear exactly why this literal interpretation has become the primary, if not the sole, reading of this landscape. Perhaps the symbolism makes the forms less alien and inscrutable to a public unused to art and ambiguity, or perhaps Schwartz's "seductive" presentations during the design phases oversold the metaphor. Maybe the thin veneer of critical regionalism appeals to architectural critics tired of the uniformity/universality of Modernism. Regardless, the allegorical reading of the design is unfortunate, because it removes any mystery the landscape might have had. Other interpretations, such as the Japanese garden, potentially more powerful and interesting, are negated by the desperately obvious symbolism.

Ironically, despite the public's easy apprehension of the landscape allegory, the plaza has not become a design the city has embraced, in part because the cultural and natural metaphors are not particularly well chosen. They are not so subtle as to be unimportant, yet at the same time, they do not resonate forcefully with the culture or the region. True, drumlins and jackpine exist within the state's boundaries, but in a very large as Minnesota, they are arguably not of the region. Minnesota's drumlin fields, unknown to most Minnesotans, lie approximately 150 miles to the north and west of Minneapolis in a different physiographic region. Jackpine are found, not on drumlins in central Minnesota, but in sandy outwash plains of the northern coniferous forests. Similarly, the logging history evoked by the silver seating logs lacks cultural immediacy; the big timber of Minnesota, logged off by 1910, is a distant memory for most people, if they remember it at all. And if the symbols are weak indi-
it should "create an identity," or a civic image.\textsuperscript{15} Given Schwartz's position in the avant garde, what she really means, of course, is that it should create a new identity. In case you miss this point, she drives it home by stating: "Let me put it this way: What did the Eiffel Tower have to do with Paris when it was erected? Nothing. But it was remarkable."\textsuperscript{14}

The idea that this landscape—or any landscape—is about "nothing" but an identity is an interesting idea. She's upped the ante of making landscape visible to making landscape important, a compelling concept for a profession noted for hiding its products in the background. The idea raises further fascinating questions. Can a landscape be a unifying identity for a place? Can we design identity, or does it accrete over time? Should buildings and landscapes become urban logos? Is architecture advertising? Is Minneapolis Las Vegas? Schwartz should be commended for raising such questions. But the question also remains, has she, in this place, truly accomplished what she's set out to do?

I don't believe that she has because identity is not just about new and compelling form. As any reader of Lynch's \textit{Image of the City} knows, size and scale also matter in the creation of identity and image. Although the FCP is big on eyewash, in size and scale, it's not the Eiffel Tower. A half a block in the government district of downtown simply cannot carry the weight of Schwartz's intentions; were the design located on Nicollet Mall, the pedestrian heart of the city, it might have more impact on both the urban form and the people of Minneapolis. Nor can identity be simply equated to remarkability. While the Eiffel Tower may not have been specifically "about" Paris, it was "about" more than itself or its form. Created for the 1889 World's Universal Exhibition as the world's tallest (300 m) structure, it might be considered the nineteenth century equivalent of the Kennedy administration's moon landings, symbolizing a cultural and technological supremacy the French citizenry could embrace. What qualities, what ideas, what issues does the FCP give the citizens of Minneapolis to rally around? Regionally irrelevant geological forms and a history its citizens do not recall?

The dictionary defines identity as "distinguishing character and personality," which are not based solely on appearance, but come from a deeper place of content, heart, and soul. The FCP, with its emphasis on form and weak, if not denied, content, really says nothing about Minneapolis's essential character, personality, or soul.

This is ultimately the problem with the FCP, and granted, it's one of rhetoric and intentions. But in so strongly announcing itself as the city's new identity, the design has perhaps not acknowledged the city's existing identity and personality, except in a cursory and condescending way. And Minneapolis's identity, a subtle mixture of wannabe hipness combined with pragmatic conservatism and suburban sprawl, does exist. In built form, the city's identity is found in Phillip Johnson's IDS Center, Cesar Pelli's Norwest Tower, and a raft of other buildings downtown. The
city's identity is contained in ever-evolving Nicollet Mall, in quiet Loring Park, and in the chic Walker Sculpture Garden. And it exists in yuppified Uptown and in neighborhoods as diverse as Phillips and Linden Hills. Schwartz's half-block plaza might contribute to Minneapolis's civic image, but it cannot, alone, constitute an identity for a large and multifaceted urban area. In the diffident Midwest, to even consider this smacks of hubris, a mortal sin in this land of Wobegon guilt.

It's no wonder, then, that the Federal Courthouse Plaza has not become the landmark it set out to be. Yet perhaps it will; as Schwartz has pointed out, the Eiffel Tower was reviled by the cognoscenti when first built. But Schwartz has also said "for a landscape to be functional, it must be claimed by people emotionally and spiritually." This will likely be the crucial test for the Federal Courthouse Plaza: will the public eventually embrace it? Residents have, in the past, laid claim to a landscape, the Minneapolis Park System designed by H.W.S. Cleveland. This beloved landscape, more than any other place, comprises a built identity for Minneapolis as the "City of Lakes." Only time will tell if the residents of Minneapolis will claim Schwartz's work in the same way they have embraced Cleveland's.

References


Reviewer's Commentary

GENERAL COMMENTS

Jacky Bowring

Overall, the works tried to do too much in the space available. While enthusiasm for writing is welcome, it can often mean that depth is sacrificed for breadth. The most elegant and memorable critiques are incredibly simple, deceptively so, but this is what makes them successful.

Many of the works lacked a clear position or stance for critique. Without clarity of position it is difficult to provide a meaningful interpretation of a work. Critique is not just about making relativist aesthetic judgments (i.e. I like this one more or less than that one), but about bringing understandings and interpretations of works. Good critiques should offer us new ways of seeing, from whatever ground they may be approaching the site from. They are creative acts, just as much as the designs themselves. In fact, Juan Pablo Bonta once observed that, “The ultimate interpretation of architecture into culture is the result of the work of critics no less than of designers.” (1974:67)

The Minneapolis Federal Courthouse Plaza: Meaning and Identity

Jacky Bowring

This was a very enjoyable manuscript. It makes very adept observations, has humor, and is engaging. It even manages a bit of self-parody for the landscape architecture discipline highlighting the tired ways in which judgments are made, for example, noting “the lack of places to sit and eat lunch within William Whyte’s parameters.” Such comments illustrate how normative critique can lead us to miss some other less tangible qualities of a place.

The author critiques other critiques, questioning the constructed understandings of the site – noting how the allegorical reading of the ‘drumlin park’ has become the dominant, safe reading. There is a questioning of the encoding of meaning in design. The questions the author asks regarding identity and meaning associated with Schwartz’s design relate to some of the key issues in contemporary practice. As well as interpreting her work through the interpretations of others, the author also looks at the designer’s intentions, and makes some very deft connections to her earlier writing.

The photos, completely devoid of visitors, provide a very useful supporting narrative for the article, adding a very telling indicator of the ‘success’ of the design in terms of (non)patronage.

Jane Wolff

This essay provides a thoughtful critique not only of Martha Schwartz’s work in Minneapolis but of many recent landscape projects – its point that meaning comes from a much wider range of sources than visibility is well taken. The comparison of Schwartz’s object landscape to a Japanese garden, the Eiffel Tower, and Cleveland’s Minneapolis parks system reveals the weakness of the Courthouse Plaza and other projects like it: the plaza lacks the purity and abstraction of the Japanese model, the technological content of the tower, and the complex urban structure and system-based organization of the city parks. I appreciate the author’s point that the meaning of the landscape comes from its broader relationships to geographic, urban, technological, and cultural context.

Charles Birnbaum

Bravo! This is a very successful analysis. It is pleasing to read such an imaginative assessment of Schwartz’s design with such powerful historical and contextual references. The example of the Eiffel Tower is particularly strong. I wish, however, that there were greater attention paid to the cartoonish Otterness figures that were so casually dismissed. If memory serves from a visit a couple of years ago, the surrounding building envelop on the plaza’s third side includes The Grain Exchange. This omission by the
author, when considered along with the hardworking figures who seem to emerge from the Exchange, working away atop and below the grain-shaped berms (see figure 1) suggest that further investigation is required.

In sum, this assessment rises above the others in that it places this work within the broader narrative of designed landscapes of the region from Cleveland to Halprin, while also addressing such practical requirements as landscape maintenance and security.

The Union of Art and Life Under Technology: Herbert Bayer’s Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks

Jacky Bowring

The critique skillfully situates the work in time and place, explicating how Bayer’s work is both part of and distinct from the environmental art discipline. One of the most interesting aspects has potential for further development — the interpretation of a strongly geometric work as ‘natural.’ This challenges the conventional/lazy cleaving of built works of landscape architecture into the poles of natural and cultural, and it begs further discussion. Instead, it is occluded in parts by the use of terms such as ‘blending’ and ‘seamlessly.’

The critique of the details and their lack of success is dismissed in a couple of sentences, but could have been more strongly grafted into the overall discussion. There are some points that need further explanation — how could “the sustainability of the work be obviously improved?” This seems to come out of the blue. I found the style of writing very mannered — the use of “this author” and phrases such as “all manner of recreational conveyances” read awkwardly.

Jane Wolff

I appreciate this attempt to expand the boundaries of the terms sustainable design and environmental art, and the author has chosen a good case to make his or her point that ecological design and sculptural form are and should be allies. The argument is clearly laid out, and the historical information, the research on Bayer’s attitudes and working methods, and the author’s own observation of the site all support the same conclusions. It’s interesting to remember Bayer’s connection to the Bauhaus, where there was no training in landscape architecture. He was clearly able to work with natural process as a sculptor, though. His work seems like an argument for more permeability between disciplines in education and practice.

Charles Birnbaum

A well-constructed paper that is both concise and evocative. It is pleasing to see designed earthworks considered as both public art and public process. I would like to see the author place this work within a broader historical context. I think that most readers are not familiar with Bayer’s career cannon — for example, he is absent from both Marc Treib’s Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review and Felice Frankel and Jory Johnson’s Modern Landscape Architecture. A broader assessment of his design philosophies would have been helpful here. Also, it would be interesting to understand how Bayer’s design influenced other Washington state projects with significant earthworks — for example, the work of Rich Haag at Jordan Park had a similar treatment of large earthen cones and columnar tree forms.

An Orderly Disorder: Process and Formalism in Selected Works of Michael Van Valkenburgh

Jacky Bowring

This and the Bayer critique complement each other well, in addressing issues of informality/formality, nature/culture, and the spaces between. The critique plots Van Valkenburgh’s work in relation to several other artists/designers, including Richard Haag, Robert Smithson, Robert Rauschenberg, and even John Cage. These comparisons invigorate the critique, and serve to create a useful frame for exploration. The author places the work within one of the most problematic contexts of contemporary practice — the negotiation of the dialectical field of order and disorder. This sees the critique set up a useful dia-
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