Critic at Large: Slouching Toward Minneaplois

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Abstract
The Federal Courthouse Plaza (FCP) in Minneapolis is a typical Martha Schwartz project. Critically acclaimed, it uses a minimalist design vocabulary, innovates with new materials, and expands on theoretical ideas she has previously explored. Located between the late modernist federal courthouse by Kohn Pedersen Fox to the north and the Richardsonian Romanesque city hall to the south, the half-block plaza was designed and constructed for the Government Services Administration.

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The Federal Courthouse Plaza (FCP) in Minneapolis is a typical Martha Schwartz project. Critically acclaimed, it uses a minimalist design vocabulary, innovates with new materials, and expands on theoretical ideas she has previously explored. Located between the late modernist federal courthouse by Kohn Pedersen Fox to the north and the Richardsonian Romanesque city hall to the south, the half-block plaza was designed and constructed for the Government Services Administration.

The plaza is a welcome opening in relatively dense urban fabric. The open space, however, clearly belongs to the courthouse. The building's curving facade embraces the plaza in a defining architectural gesture, while the plaza's paved stripes echo the rhythm and pattern of the building's vertical fenestration. The stripes almost seem to climb up the building walls, strengthening the unification between facade and ground plane. The move recalls Schwartz's early project, Lined Parterre with Skywriter.

The FCP plays other 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 oblong grassy mounds located within a field and oriented 30 degrees off the axes 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 (1988), Necco Garden (1980), or Center for Innovative Technology (1988). Not as complex conceptually as Todos Santos Plaza (1987), the design is instead characterized by a cool simplicity. The plaza might be considered a Frankensteinian descendant of Peter Walker's Tanner Fountain, in which the fountain's rocks, enlarged and geologically transformed, have been let loose from their rigid circle to slouch, sluglike, toward the city on some horrifying mission.

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 lack of imagination than an insurmountable design "flaw." Trim rectangular stone bollards unobtrusively control circulation along the curb lines. 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.

Of course, the design is not perfect. There's a lack of shade on the plaza, as well as a much-ballyhooed lack of (Continued on Page 130)

Martha Schwartz's design for the Minneapolis Federal Courthouse Plaza has been the focus of both praise and criticism. For extensive photo coverage of the plaza, see "Dance of the Drumlins," Landscape Architecture, August 1999.
Critically large...

(Continued from Page 132) places to sit and eat lunch within William Whyte's parameters. This latter concern seems a petty criticism. Until global warming kicks in, Minnesota's climate precludes outdoor lunching in any plaza much of the year.

Overall, the FCP 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 making 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. 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," the design might be read as a critique of the landscape architecture profession's use of landform. Based on Schwartz's 1990 essay "Landscape and Common Culture Since Modernism," the idea for the mounds at the FCP might have originated much earlier than the plaza's commission. In this article, Schwartz describes the profession as hopelessly mired in 18th-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. Unthinking, we dredge up the rolling English countryside like a universal balm, without questioning its appropriateness or viability in today's environment.

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. 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 insured to the 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:

Tom Otterness's sculpture
"Rockman" strides through the advancing drumlins on the plaza.

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 glacial 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 jackpine, 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 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 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 region. True, drumlins and jackpine exist within the state's boundaries, but Minnesota's drumlin fields 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 silverstaining 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 individually, collectively they do not mean much more, since the form of the design does not engage the symbolism. If you don’t know that the logs “speak to the heart of Minnesotans’ collective memory,” there is nothing in their placement or relationship to the other plaza elements that would indicate their significance: They are just logs.

Schwartz has downplayed the significance of symbolism in the design. She emphasizes that the mounds only “suggest a landscape” and openly acknowledges that “the design is not specifically of Minnesota.” Though these statements seem a little disingenuous given how many times the word “Minnesota” appears in the project description, it is apparent that the form of the design is, for Schwartz, ultimately more important than any meanings it might contain. Indeed, her stated intent for the design is that it should “create an identity,” or a civic image. Given Schwartz’s position in the avant-garde, what she really means, of course, is that it should create a new identity. She drives this point 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.”

The idea that this landscape—or any landscape—is about “nothing” but an identity is an interesting idea. Schwartz has 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 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? 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 she has, because identity is not just about new and compelling form. As any reader of Lynch’s 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 structure, it was the 19th-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, says nothing about Minneapolis’s essential character, personality, or soul.

This is ultimately the problem with the FCP. In so strongly announcing itself as the city’s new identity, the design has perhaps not acknowledged the city’s existing identity and personality. And Minneapolis’s identity, a strange and subtle mixture of wanna-be hipness combined with pragmatic conservatism and suburban sprawl, does exist. This identity is found in Phillip Johnson’s IDS Center, Cesar Pelli’s Norwest Tower, and a raft of other buildings downtown. It is contained in ever-evolving Nicollet Mall, in quiet Loring Park, and in the chic Walker Sculpture Garden. Identity 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 this multifaceted urban area.

It’s no wonder, then, that the FCP 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 be the crucial test for the Federal Courthouse Plaza: Will the public eventually embrace it? Minneapolis’s 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 embrace Cleveland’s.

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RESOURCES


