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Treasuring Urban Oases

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Alexander Garvin, natty in bowtie and jacket, watched commuters hustle through the gray, sunken concrete plaza at Citigroup Center on Lexington Avenue. Across 53rd Street, in the fading afternoon light, more New Yorkers ducked into a faceless subway kiosk on the triangular patch of wind-swept sidewalk — ostensibly a second public plaza — that occupies the southeast corner. This is the city’s public realm, or part of it.

What passes for public space in many crowded neighborhoods often means some token gesture by a developer, built in exchange for the right to erect a taller skyscraper. Mr. Garvin, an architect, urban planner and veteran of five city administrations, going back to the era of Mayor John V. Lindsay (1966-73), has spent the better part of the last half-century thinking about these spaces.

“The public realm is what we own and control,” he told me the other day when we met to look around Midtown. More than just common property, he added, “the streets, squares, parks, infrastructure and public buildings make up the fundamental element in any community — the framework around which everything else grows.”

Or should grow.

Writing in The New York Times last week, Christopher B. Leinberger, a professor of urban planning, took note of “a profound structural shift” in America during the last decade or so, “a reversal of what took place in the 1950s.” Back then drivable suburbs boomed while center cities decayed. Now more and more people want to settle in “a walkable urban downtown.” The most expensive housing in the country, and not just New York City, is in “high-density, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods,” he said.

But what makes high-density neighborhoods pedestrian friendly?

Good public space, for starters.

The best public spaces encourage diverse urban experiences, from people watching to protesting, daydreaming to handball, eating, reading and sunbathing to strolling and snoozing.

Witness the High Line. The park opened a couple of years ago on the West Side with no special program of cultural offerings or other headline attractions to lure people. The attraction was, and remains, the place itself. Its success shows how much can be achieved, economically and architecturally, when city government and private interests make the public realm, on a grand scale, their shared interest. Governors Island is another enlightened urban experiment. Leslie Koch, its president, has been planning the island to respond to what people want to do there. The layout of green spaces, bike paths, playgrounds and pavilions evolves as the public uses the place each summer, a process that flips around how most public spaces get designed.

That said, in a contentious city where you can't plant a single tree without somebody complaining to City Hall, expecting the public to oversee the design of the public realm at large is nuts. Besides, as everybody learned about Zuccotti Park, much public space is not even really public but privately owned, and landlords find ways to restrict access by cutting hours or limiting activities.

We've been so fixated on fancy new buildings that we've lost sight of the spaces they occupy and we share. Last month Mr. Garvin addressed a conclave of architects, planners and public officials from around the country and abroad, who met on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of New York's landmark 1961 zoning resolution. That resolution established the incentive program for private developers, whereby developers construct public spaces — plaza “bonuses,” in zoning lingo — in return for bigger buildings. Acres of some of the costliest real estate in town have been turned into arcades and squares as a consequence, but sheer space, the urban sociologist Holly Whyte famously observed, is not “of itself” what people need or want. Quality, not quantity, is the issue.

Mr. Garvin argues that the city should reverse its approach, zoning neighborhoods like Midtown, Lower Manhattan and Williamsburg, Brooklyn, by thinking first about the shape of public space instead of private development. And it was clear why on our walk. We started at the Citigroup Plaza, which is far from the worst public space in the city. With a few shops, trees and the entrances to the building and subway drawing people down into it, it's at least busier and less glum than most sunken plazas, and inviting in ways that the barren patch of sidewalk across the street isn't. But the two sites were developed piecemeal, as separate footnotes to skyscrapers. “If from the beginning,” Mr. Garvin said, the city had organized “all the subway entrances, stairways, corridors, shops and plazas through which pedestrians flow and into which sunlight should penetrate, this might have been a great public space.”

Rockefeller Center, Times Square and Bryant Park (which copies much from European landmarks like the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris), are among the world's great public spaces and they are also commercial hubs. The goal is to learn from their success, and avoid lost

opportunities like Lexington Avenue and 53rd Street.

The Dutch today put together what they call “structure plans” when they undertake big new public projects, like their high-speed rail station in Rotterdam: before celebrity architects show up, urban designers are called in to work out how best to organize the sites for the public good. It’s a formalized, fine-grained approach to the public realm. By contrast, big urban projects on the drawing board in New York still tend to be the products of negotiations between government agencies anxious for economic improvement and private developers angling for zoning exemptions. As with the ill-conceived Atlantic Yards project in Brooklyn, the streets, subway entrances and plazas around Flatbush and Atlantic Avenues, where millions of New Yorkers will actually feel the development’s effects, seem like they’ve hardly been taken into account.

Meanwhile the public demand for parks, squares and more pedestrian-oriented streets only grows. Every new plaza the city opens, like the recent one on Gansevoort Street, instantly fills up; local shop owners reap the benefits. Retail sales rose in Times Square after Broadway was closed to traffic two years ago and became a pedestrian plaza, contrary to what some businesses there feared.

The transformation of Times Square required brave thinking by the Bloomberg administration. The same level of daring might help blossoming neighborhoods like Bushwick, Brooklyn, and could yet redeem New York’s most ignominious failure to safeguard the public realm, Penn Station. Creative redesign (turn 33rd Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues into a car-free, glassed-over pedestrian gateway to the station) and a little hardball politics (find another home for Madison Square Garden) might still turn the Farley Post Office into a dignified Amtrak terminal and bring some light and air into what is now a rat’s warren of a transit hub suffered by 550,000 commuters each day.

From the Citigroup Center, Mr. Garvin navigated the northern sidewalk along 53rd Street, made nearly impassable by a phalanx of planted security bollards. At Park Avenue he climbed the steps leading up to the plaza of Mies van der Rohe’s great Seagram Building, a modernized Italian piazza raised a few feet above Park Avenue. Imagine, Mr. Garvin said, if Park Avenue were altogether redesigned now for the public realm. “Why should there be a median that no one uses?” he asked. “Suppose the street was reconfigured, with one of the sidewalks widened and connected to the plazas along the street? You don’t build great public spaces incrementally,” he repeated, and marched on toward Rockefeller Center.

Its pedestrian passage, lined with brightly lighted shops, meticulously maintained, sloping toward the skating rink, framing the view that unfolds when you arrive; its network of subway

entrances, underground concourses and open spaces, carefully mapped out from the start: what makes Rockefeller Center special, its Art Deco details aside, is how the site was conceived around public space. “It doesn’t get better than this,” Mr. Garvin said.

In Times Square he lamented the forest of telephone booths and lampposts that have become archaic impediments in the era of cellphones and lighted signs, but he praised the farsighted zoning law enacted in the Edward I. Koch era that demanded those lighted signs. In Bryant Park Mr. Garvin exalted the plan by which local businesses bonded together during the 1980s and retailers on the site helped to pay for one of the most incredible urban transformations in New York history. Once a crime-ridden symbol of urban blight and the bankruptcy of public space, the park was a crowded wonderland the other day, with its Christmas market, food stalls and cafes.

Mr. Garvin’s final destination, as dusk turned to dark: Grand Central. Packed with commuters, it’s a daily reminder of how the public realm, at its best, speaks to the aspirations of a society and the nobility of a great city.

He spread his arms. “We ought to be able to learn from this,” he said.

That was his challenge to public officials. And to the rest of us too.