

Field Notes for *Jacob Javits Plaza: Reconsidering Intentions* by John Hill

Jacob Javits Plaza – 10:00 a.m.-11:30 a.m., Friday, April 13, 2007

Low clouds fill the sky, though the sun briefly pokes through every now and then, about every 15-20 minutes. It is cool, with the temperature in the upper 40s or lower 50s and an almost constant breeze out of the east, blowing paper debris and plastic bags around the plaza.

The plaza is a rectangular space that tapers towards the north and Worth Street. Lafayette Street borders to the east, beyond a series of steps that increase as the sidewalk slopes down to the south; this situation means wheelchair access to the plaza is limited to the north edge and Worth Street. The 8-story U.S. Court of International Trade building sits to the south. The 41-story Jacob Javits Federal Building towers over the plaza to the west; entry to this building is off the plaza. A 4-story bridge links these two buildings in the plaza's SW corner, though access underneath the bridge is not available due to the ongoing construction of new security entries for both buildings.

A series of curving, lime-green benches fill most of the plaza space, snaking around six planted mounds that rise above eye level when sitting and standing. The curving of the benches create convex and concave areas for seating, with some benches back-to-back and some alone, though mainly the former. The curving theme is carried to the stair railings along the two street frontages. A plywood-clad exhaust cover, painted to resemble pink granite, anchors the NW corner of the plaza. Two major paths, each aligned with the entries to the bordering federal buildings, create a major node in the plaza that shifts its "center of gravity" away from the corner and towards the south.

Arriving about ten minutes before 10am, it's apparent that the less-than-ideal weather conditions are keeping many people from using the benches. A group of four Hispanic individuals – three men and one woman – sit in the far NW corner; one of the men sits on the planted mound rather than the bench, aligned with the woman who sits between the other two men opposite; they have paperwork and seem to be intently going over it; my guess is they are preparing for business in the Javits Building. I seat myself at the south end of the plaza, near the intersection of the two main paths of circulation, though the height of the mounds means I must rise and walk occasionally to see the whole plaza.

The count at exactly 10am is nine people either sitting on the benches or standing within the area of the benches. Two Asian women stretch in one of the small concave sections near the steps by Lafayette Street. A woman walks up the steps, cutting through the plaza but not biting off much for what it's worth, and looks at the two women stretching the whole time she walks by them. Another woman sits in the large concave area directly north of the two women stretching; she is reading a newspaper and is wearing a large, fur-lined hood. A number of people smoke in the designated smoking area located in the SW corner of the plaza, in front of the 4-story bridge connecting the two buildings.

The count at 10:15 has fallen to two people, the woman reading the newspaper and a man on his cell phone near the west edge. Along this west edge – not strictly in the plaza area, but near and under the columns of the Federal Building – is another grouping of smokers. A woman I noticed walking north along that central axis of the plaza earlier in the morning, who wasn't wearing a coat, returns in the opposite direction with a shopping bag; she slows her stride as she walks alongside me, looks inside the bag, and then continues walking south past me.

There is a continuous parade of traffic along the edges of the plaza, both on the surrounding sidewalks and along the fronts of the International Trade and, especially, Javits buildings. I decide to ignore those walking on the surrounding sidewalks, but I count those walking in front of the two buildings. The users of the plaza space itself seem to fall into a few categories: those with business in the Javits building, which houses an immigration court; those from the Javits building who have strayed from the designated smoking area; those passing by on their way somewhere else; and those who've made the plaza a destination.

At 10:30 the count is three people, the only carry-over being the woman reading the newspaper, though by this time, with her back to me, she appears to just be sitting, not reading her paper anymore. While the sun has poked through the clouds a couple times, the temperature and wind makes my hands cold enough I need to put on gloves and blows the papers on my clipboard enough to make note-taking difficult, though not impossible. A Hispanic couple walks slowly in front of me, coming from the direction of the Javits Building; he smokes and holds a green folder in his other hand; she isn't carrying anything and appears to be doing most of the talking, or at least she's the loudest of the two, though she speaks in Spanish so I can't understand; they stand near the top of the steps and look to the east as he smokes, she playfully moving around to stay warm, her long ponytail bouncing as she does, and he crouched over in an attempt to stay warm; they look at a double-decker tour bus going by (now driving by more frequently) and then slowly walk down the steps, leaving the plaza. As the above is happening, a woman walks towards the Javits entry, stops in front of me, puts her papers down on the bench of which she's on the backside of, fixes her hair, picks up her papers and then continues to walk to the building entrance.

At 10:45 the count is four people, though the newspaper woman with the hood is not one of them, she has left. After about 45 minutes I've observed a number of people walk towards the Javits entry from the NE corner, walk into the enclosed, concave area around one of the mounds and walk out the way they came in order to walk around the benches and reach the entrance. This points to a directionality created by the gap in the benches near the NE corner that is then denied by this closure of the benches. In other words, while the two main axes allow unimpeded movement from sidewalk to building, this minor, or unintended axis manages to repeatedly confuse people, pointing to a flaw in the plaza's design, something the mound's restricting visuals of the entry doesn't remedy. This same situation occurs in the mounded area in the SE corner, as people try to exit the plaza, though it does not happen as frequently as the one near the Javits entry. Two young women walk into the mound area directly in front of me (the only ones who do that there), only to find themselves unable to walk in their intended direction, but rather than retrace their steps, they jump over the bench, giggling as they do, and run down the steps towards Lafayette. It appears that their jumping "solution" to their frustration was helped by the absence of another bench backing the one wrapping the mound. The benches near the Javits entry and the SE corner though are back-to-back and therefore hard to jump. During this 15-minute interval, I also see an old Asian (Chinese?) man carrying two colored plastic bags, with what looks like styrofoam food containers in each, sit on a bench near the intersection of the two main axes; after a few minutes he is joined by another old Asian man; after exchanging some pleasantries they part, each man carrying one bag. I see a Caucasian man dressed business-like walk assuredly from the Javits building and flag a cab directly in front of me, about 100' from the curb; by the time he reaches the curb he's getting in a cab. I see one of the brown-jacketed security guards, who up to this point have limited their presence to the entry doors at the Javits Building, slowly walk in front of me towards Lafayette, turn around at the top of the steps, walk past me again and turn and walk towards the Immigration Building. I simultaneously see three plastic bags swirl around the plaza, recalling *American Beauty*.

At 11am the count is three, and it appears the hooded woman is back, though in the NW corner of the plaza, facing my direction. A janitor makes his way clockwise to the various trash receptacles, emptying the trash into the bin he pushes around; his pace is slow and somewhat lazy. A woman enters the confusing mound area near the Javits entry, so I start to note her like the others, though she sits down and lights a cigarette; she later talks on a cell phone and leaves after about 15 minutes. I start to recognize people, mainly smokers, from earlier in the day, like a young male with what looks like bleached hair who ran by after I first arrived; he's now smoking near the Javits entrance.

At 11:15 the count is three. Very little happens before I leave at 11:30. A family of four walks into the mound area in the NW corner, where the two kids look to the east as they impatiently jump around and both parents talk on their cell phones. They don't sit but leave the area and walk towards Worth Street. As I'm heading to the coffee shop across Worth Street, the family stands on the corner, the two kids still antsy, the father on the phone, and the mother speaking in Spanish.

From the coffee shop I notice a couple things: Two Hispanic gentlemen with folders sit in the vestibule looking towards the plaza. Their apparent patience and paperwork (colored folder like others I'd seen while sitting in the plaza) point to them having an appointment across the street. This indicates that in inclement weather one function of the plaza (those with business at one of the immigration buildings) is extended to this indoor space. Second, as I'm eating at the counter in the coffee shop that overlooks the plaza I notice a couple people separately J-walk across Duane Street to the plaza on axis with this main circulation path. This indicates that the two major axes in some sense extend beyond the physical constraints of the plaza itself, into the streets beyond.

I cut through the plaza on the way to the train and see that the Hispanic couple, with the green folder and the long ponytail, has returned. He smokes again as they slowly make their way towards the Javits entrance.

Jacob Javits Plaza – 11:45 a.m-1:00 p.m., Monday, April 23, 2007

The sky is a cloudless blue with temperatures in the upper 70s and a slight breeze from the east. It's the first warm day of the Spring, so the plaza is teeming with people unlike just ten days before when it was pretty much barren. When I arrive approximately 25 people are seated or standing within the plaza area; by the time I leave there are three times as many, an increase of approximately 8-15 times as many people over the previous visit.

When I arrive, even though there are many more people than the previous visit, the uses and movements are very much the same. A lot of movement takes place along the two buildings and through the plaza perpendicular to the Javits entry, which creates the most traffic flow. A number of smokers occupy the areas at and near the designated smoking area (the only area of the plaza in shade at this time), as well as along the east face of the Javits building. In addition to smoking, users are talking on their cell phones, eating lunch, reading (an extension of lunch, in some cases), and waiting to go into the Javits building. Users appear to be either employees or those with business in the building, though the occasional tourists appear, usually on the periphery, in one case a couple standing at the top of the steps to take a picture to the east, and a couple standing in the shade near the designated smoking area to look at a map. Immediately upon arrival a couple walks around the mounded area in front of me (I'm seated in the same location as the previous visit), retracing their steps to exit the plaza to the north; a man also walks into the mounded area to my right, trying to exit the plaza south along Lafayette.

A few things become apparent with the larger plaza population: 1) With such long linear feet of benches (approx. 1,700 feet!) the plaza never appears full, if anything it appears closer to empty; 2) People distribute

themselves in a manner that reinforces or creates the impression of #1, pointing to proxemics as a theory for approaching observations about the plaza; 3) duration in the plaza is short, never more than 30-45min, owing to the abundance of employees on lunch breaks, the smokers, and a lack of shade that discourages long stays, especially on a sunny and warm day like this.

During my 75-minute visit, I see a few large groups (4-5 people) utilizing the concave portions, something that follows logically from the bench layout. Individuals though don't limit themselves to the convex benches; an equal distribution of individuals among the two types of curves is apparent, pointing to the character of these two types: the convex benches allow one to sit relatively isolated (as any neighbors on the same bench are out of eyesight) though it also puts the individual "on display." The concave benches tend to wrap the mounds, so these areas provide for increased visual isolation, even though neighbors are in peripheral view.

The mapping of distribution and movement of people in and across the plaza points to focusing on the proxemics and wayfinding of the space for the study. Given the history of the site (a badly-designed plaza apparently made worse by an artwork removed after only 8 years and replaced by a new plaza designed in complete opposition to this artwork) it also seems important to address how people perceive the space in relation to its artistic tendencies, beyond its intended and apparent usefulness.

Discussion Forum responses:

Architect Discussion:

"Having waited at that Plaza four times during my naturalization process, I have to say [that] while the benches are much more useful than an overbearing scallous art piece, they are 'over designed' in that the inhabitability of the plaza is not greatly improved by their presence. The lack of shade is almost unbearable, and the curves merely a graphical exercise in the spirit of Serra. (Come to think of it, at least the Serra pieces gave some shade). I also got caught in one of the curves first time I went there, foolishly thinking I would be able to follow a direct path into the building. Not many people seem to use it, and the line for Immigration services wraps along the building, not utilizing the seats at all. So I guess it's underutilized on purpose as well. Plus, the seats are just damned ugly! Never went there while the Serra was up, however...so I couldn't tell you for sure whether the plaza has been improved or not."

"It looks like an easy drawing. By looking at the plan, a person has to transverse the whole creation to get to the other side unless they jump over the seats. Probably there is a hard assed position about this in the designer's mind but when things like that are forced in pedestrian oriented spaces, I just want to go there and break the damn thing in the middle or just have the designer go around and around as a punishment. Take your joke somewhere else. Related note: I remember Serra saying/threatening, he'd leave the country if they remove his brutality from the plaza. They did and did he leave the country? No.. fuck him too. He is not the greatest artist they make him to be."

pushpullbar forum:

"In my case, I walked by the other day not knowing it previously and I thought it was really bland and homogeneous, but immediately recognized the style of Martha Schwartz. It looks like she designed a pattern and placed it within the plaza boundaries without any sensitivity either to human scale or the environment. I think that she cannot resort anymore to her shapes repertoire without looking repetitive and simplistic. Maybe Serra's sculpture served as a park in a more varied way than this park, with people leaning against it or using it as a shading device."

Wired New York Forum:

“The plaza as now designed is a complete failure -- a failure because it originally contained steam which rose from the top of each of the mounds (which were originally covered in suburban grass, rather than the box hedges that are there now). The technology that operated the steam broke down -- or just never worked properly -- so they scrapped that aspect of the design (I think this happened in year one). What you see now is a compromise of the Schwartz design. The existing design has erased any ironic qualities of the original vision. All that is left is a whimsical pattern of benches and colors. Cute but kitschy. Perhaps it is now a better place to eat lunch than when Serra's TILTED ARC bisected the plaza -- but beyond that I give this one a zero. And who knows what other changes will come about as the Feds finish up their work on the "Security Pavilions" at the edges of the Javits / International Court of Trade (while taking the second photo below I just about got busted by a otherwise friendly Federal Agent who flashed her badge and told me it was illegal to take pictures of Federal Buildings) ...”

“*Tilted Arc* was too visionary, a victim of being before its time. In today's world, duplicates of it would completely surround the entire building interspersed with security gates. Think about it. Serra's statement intentionally impeded freedom of movement in the plaza, but for intellectual and experiential purposes. If *Tilted Arc* was restored to the plaza, our experience of it - in this location - would be altered by the realities of security in an age of fear and terrorism. Likewise, the compromised Schwartz's plaza has to address conflicting needs for security, safety, community, and a pleasant lunch. It comes close. What's needed is a touch of whimsy with an edge of irony.”

“Those swirling benches are a ridiculous maze of frustration. I hate them. HATE them. They are ugly and, although they are fun to look at from above, they are not practical at all to park goers.”

Interview responses (friends in an otherwise empty plaza on a weekend):

Married couple:

She: I think they repainted it recently. It's cute, with its round and curly shapes. The colors are weird though; don't know why they picked them. Not a very practical plaza, more artistic, very empty, and the benches are not comfortable.

He: It's a practical space, not artistic. Don't know why it's not crowded, though. Whimsical design that allows for different groupings, choices, but nobody using it. Feels like some separation between plaza and sidewalk (partial height wall?) would be nice. I like the space, but don't know why it's not used more.

Woman:

Sees it as landscape rather than art. It's fun, though the Serra is art. Benches are like landscape furniture. It doesn't need art. Nice contrast of angular (buildings) and curvy, soft (benches and mounds). It feels like it could be anywhere, like it just landed there, like it's temporary, not gonna last...except for the mounds that seem to grow from the place, like broccoli. Likes the place, the artificial colors.