

Physical Spaces and Public Life

by Sharon Irish



Sharon Irish
University of Illinois,
Urbana-Champaign, USA

Buildings exist in time and may be reclaimed for new purposes. In claiming architectural spaces, we expand the meanings of the original designs, possibly strengthen community bonds and broaden architects' roles.

Tema RUM FÖR KULTUR

PHAEDRUS, in Paul Valéry's *Eupalinos, or the Architect* (1924), asks if one notices, while walking in the city among buildings, that some of the buildings "are *mute*, others *speak* and others, finally – and they are most rare – *sing*?"¹ In this essay I would like to explore how some citizens have used public or semi-public spaces to promote dialogues among people while also reinterpreting architectural voices, be they silent, spoken, or choral. I have selected examples from the United States with which I am familiar personally, although the activities are not unique to this country.

How do people interact with the literal and figurative openings in a public building? Are there ways that the general public can use physical spaces to increase communication among themselves? In certain instances architectural

settings further dialogue among citizens and lead not only to better understandings of civic issues but also to new appreciations for contemporary or historic designs. The examples I offer of temporary installations in public sites in the United States suggest some ways designers might increase positive interactions among us all.

The installations with which I am concerned are intentional constructions that temporarily appropriate space to make a point or accomplish a goal.² My selections are not buildings, though each relates to an architect-designed building. I use the word "public" loosely. Certainly in the last several decades in urban areas, zoning variances and public amenities within private spaces have redefined the meaning of public space. I use public to mean an area where large numbers of people congregate and/or to which they have access: malls, parks, government buildings, skyscraper atria, and streets and sidewalks.



Figure 1. Streams of Conscience in Bowling Green Park, New York City, a performance by Donna Henes, June 1984, in front of the New York Custom House, 1899–1907, Cass Gilbert, architect, with sculpture of “America” by D. C. French to the left of central arch. Photo courtesy of Donna Henes.

The three examples I present challenge each of us to think about and discuss contemporary problems in America. Most of the installations arose from concerns shared by small groups or a particular individual; all spotlight their ideas in a forum of public architectural space. I believe that the architectural settings selected increase the impact of those “claiming space” because of the contrast between the temporary and the permanent, the challengers and the status quo. In each case, the “space claimers” were local, responding to local versions of global problems. When projects find a way to affirm or build a connection to common values in a locality and establish a dialogue, the result is a deepened group identity; enhanced self-respect; stronger public skills; and support for the values of cooperation and citizen responsibility. These criteria form what Sara Evans and Harry Boyte label “free spaces;” they consider these spaces sources for democratic change in America.³

Brooklyn-based performance artist Donna Henes reminds us:

[A]t this very moment we’re on a planet, we’re walking upside down, we’re revolving and spinning through space at the same moment ... How often does this enter your consciousness? We don’t notice it, let alone notice the first day of the season, longest or shortest day of the year ... So I guess that’s my job, to point that out to us in the city and to create ways we can celebrate that are ... meaningful to us in modern times. Because the only thing that’s going to save the planet is to start thinking of ourselves as a planet...⁴

In front of New York City’s U.S. Custom House, self-styled urban shaman Donna Henes organized a ritual for peace at the summer solstice in 1984. “Streams of Conscience” was performed at the Bowling Green, a spot in lower Manhattan that is filled with people in business suits



Figure 2. New York Custom House at Bowling Green, New York, from I. N. Phelps Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island* v. 3: pl. 165 (1915).

with packed agendas. The site is round with a round fountain. Henes said:

I filled it with little circular mirrors to absorb positive images... For 17 hours people chanted for peace. Wall Street workers came by and joined us. People thought it was unusual – but what’s more unusual is that something in our culture forces people to act in alienating ways.⁵

I find Henes’s projects all the more powerful because of the settings she chooses. Cass Gilbert, the architect of the 1907 Custom House at New York’s Bowling Green, in 1903 invited the renowned sculptor Daniel Chester French to carve four statues representing the “Continents” – Asia, America, Europe and Africa. Completed and installed in 1907, French’s work reflects the imperial designs and hierarchical construction of U.S.

foreign policy, then and now.⁶ For “America,” French composed three figures into a pyramid, with the kneeling figure of Labor holding a wheel of Progress and an Indian gazing over a powerful woman’s shoulder. This sculpture is visible in Fig. 2, to the left of the central arched entry. The woman, the personification of America, has a sheaf of corn in her lap. As a backdrop for Henes’ banners that were offerings for peace in many languages, the Custom House stands as a reminder that government choices indeed affect us all. Here is a sculptural group marking the main facade that sings the praises of national commercial power and importation of resources for industrial growth. While French’s “America” carries a torch and appears alert to future opportunity, “Europe” sits calmly amid symbols of the past, “Asia” meditates and “Africa” sleeps.

The Custom House is traditional, in the sense that it was built to fit in, to be complicit with a dominant aesthetic that would meet the clients' expectations.⁷ How can we insert new meanings into structures that seem ideologically and stylistically outmoded? Diana Agrest advocates this approach: "To design is not to reclose but to affect the openings and be affected by them, to play an intersection between two subjects..."⁸ Celebrations like "Streams of Conscience" do affect the openings, among people and, figuratively, among spaces. The New York Custom House bears witness to the values of the powerful at the time it was built. But Mary McLeod has pointed out that the "ever-quickenening cycle of consumption ... seems to cause political meanings to change with increasing rapidity..."⁹ What once seemed timeless and universal, to those who designed the building at least, now seems timebound and related to a particular class of people. Still, buildings have interstices, spaces that we can use to reopen dialogues about our past and present. To do so does not mean building more structures that relate visually to the context of older buildings, though that is sometimes appropriate, but rather to reclaim the spaces that already exist in the built environment and invert them, subvert them, reuse them and reinvent them on an ongoing basis.

Many buildings and open spaces, both existing and in the design stages, do not invite user participation, but some actually discourage it. William Whyte notes in *City*: "Given a fine location, it is difficult to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished."¹⁰ What can we users do to reclaim space that we inhabit but have had no say in how it looks or functions? Architectural historian Dolores Hayden has used the power of places in Los Angeles to teach history and culture. "[M]any of these sites... could be designed to help everyone recall and remember. The sum of all the sites could be a network of new public places designed for the preservation and interpretation of Los Angeles' unique social history."¹¹ In addition to educa-

ting all of us about specific histories, designers also can alert users to the "covert power," in Walter Benjamin's words, that architecture exerts. Designer Andrea Kahn points out that this power "is embodied ... in the presentational elements of architecture, each of which constitutes an apparatus of control: walls erect barriers to free movement; windows, in framing given views, determine the scope of vision; thresholds tell us where to go."¹²

As an architectural historian, my interest is in how existing buildings might be rewoven into the urban fabric, how their walls, windows and thresholds can be reclaimed for more of us to use. If citizens can view extant buildings as part of a legacy that can be transformed, perpetually rediscovered, to paraphrase Dana Cuff, rather than demolished, the built environment usually will be richer for the diversity.¹³ Often retrofitting or re-use makes financial sense as well. Obviously, buildings constructed now will involve similar issues as cities change in the future. Perhaps if designers can be aware of "how buildings learn," as Stewart Brand has titled his recent book, future buildings can "learn" more effectively.¹⁴ In addition to reclaiming existing spaces, it is vital that we build new spaces that adapt through time.

Architect Anne Vernez-Moudon asserts:

We cannot afford to internalize and privatize our cities. Downtowns and commercial areas are some of the few remaining refuges in our cities where people of mixed backgrounds can come in contact with each other; preserving this mix and reinforcing life in the public realm go hand in hand.¹⁵

Artists and activists who have used public sites in major urban centers to call for peace and justice sometimes spark the mix and revitalize spaces where people can argue, object, challenge and rethink their own and the nation's priorities. To institutionalize or professionalize these settings could narrow the vision by setting it in stone or steel, literally and figuratively. But, when new spaces do seem necessary, a rich-

Figure 3. Crystal Court of the IDS Center, 1968–73, Philip Johnson, John Burgee with Edward F. Baker, Minneapolis, Minnesota, with Whisper Project performance in May 1987, organized by Suzanne Lacy, with contributions by Susan Stone and Miriam Schapiro, among others. Photo by Peter Latner.



ness of interchange can be built in by thinking of space as a matrix: providing for multiple uses with flexibility, complexity, and connectedness.¹⁶

One way to design public or publicly accessible work that enhances flexibility, complexity and connectedness is to think of the space in terms of its theatrical possibilities. I have found recent performance art in America instructive. The linkages between theater and architecture are not new, and the possible directions are numerous. William Whyte has studied streets at length: "Good performers and good audiences. These are the stuff of a good street life. Its vigor is a test of the vigor of the city itself."¹⁷ In the performances discussed here, existing buildings provide the stage settings.

Two recent projects of the performance artist Suzanne Lacy rely on public spaces for the performers and the audiences. The first work, produced by the Whisper Minnesota Project, culminated in a public performance in May of 1987 in Philip Johnson, John Burgee and Edward F. Baker's IDS Center (1973) in Minneapolis, Minnesota.¹⁸ The second work, called Full Circle, was completed in September of 1993 in Chi-

cago. In both projects, Suzanne Lacy was the catalyst, organizing local groups already dedicated to improving women's lives, and coordinating their participation in these ambitious performance pieces. While she holds the flame, so to speak, of the artistic ideas, she is able to join with others and allow a collective work to develop.

The Whisper Project was a two-year organizing effort to draw attention to the contributions and concerns of older women in the state of Minnesota. Lacy, in residence at the time at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, worked with an institute of public affairs at the University of Minnesota, the Young Women's Christian Association (YMCA), non-profit groups dedicated to alleviating the problems of the elderly, and individual women all over the state, to exhibit a "living quilt" in the faceted eight-story glass atrium of the IDS Tower, a space dubbed the Crystal Court. The 51-story IDS building was the tallest building by far in Minneapolis for nearly a decade, notable both for its grand scale and its functions as corporate headquarters, offices, hotel, retail shops and parking garage. The Whisper Project event, held on Mother's Day,

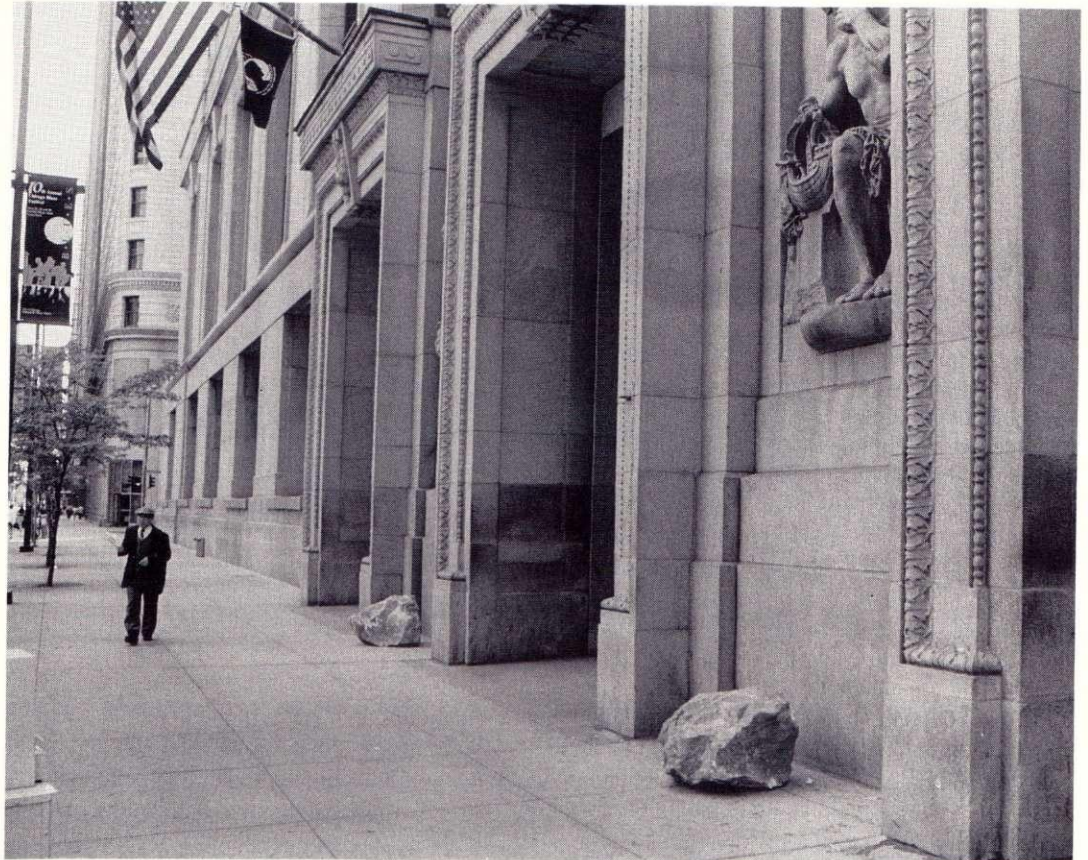


Figure 4. Monuments to Women of the Full Circle Project, organized by Suzanne Lacy and a coalition of Chicago women, May 1993, City-County Building, 1909–11, Holabird and Roche, architects, Chicago, Illinois. Photo by George Philosophus

involved 430 older women (women over 55) from all over the state of Minnesota who came together in the atrium at tables arranged in a quilt pattern. The performance was multi-layered: conversations were going on among the audience on the balconies and the floor, among the participants at the tables and on a pre-recorded soundtrack.

At the appointed time, the participants, clothed in black, entered the usually bustling atrium of this downtown financial center and unfolded black tablecloths to show yellow and red on the reverse sides. Then, seated at over 100 square tables in groups of four, the women slowly moved their hands in unison across the tablecloths while talking amongst themselves about issues important to them, ranging from the future to health care, from intimacy to public

policy. A taped collage of Native American and Hmong songs, sounds of birds and thunder, and prerecorded conversations by some of the participants had been arranged by Susan Stone; the quilt design was by artist Miriam Schapiro. Several thousand people were in the audience, and public television taped the performance.

Lacy used a found space, a skyscraper space, to culminate her organizing work. The traditions represented by the multiple stories of glass and steel and the business hustle of downtown corporate offices were at once sidelined and reinterpreted, temporarily, by these women.

In Chicago, Illinois, the downtown business district, outlined by elevated train tracks since 1897, is known as the Loop, after the route of the cable car system dating from the 1880s. In the same decade that cable cars replaced horse cars



Figure 5. Monuments to Women of Full Circle Project, Daley Plaza in front of Daley Center, 1963–65, C. F. Murphy Associates, Chicago, Illinois. Photo by George Philosophus

around the central commercial district of Chicago, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded a settlement house on the near-west side of the city in 1889, to be known as Hull House. Hull House served the large immigrant communities surrounding it and brought together people of various classes to exchange ideas. Jane Addams (1860–1935) was a tireless reformer, calling for justice in housing, education and working conditions, locally and globally.¹⁹

To honor the service and compassion of women like Jane Addams, Suzanne Lacy, together with the Sculpture Chicago program and a diverse volunteer group, placed 100 large boulders inscribed with individual women's names in Chicago's Loop in May of 1993. Fig. 4 shows one of the monuments placed in front of Chicago's City Hall and Cook County Courthouse

(1909–11, Holabird and Roche).²⁰ These "Monuments to Women" were the first part of the Full Circle project, an effort to recognize the achievements and contributions of women from the past and in the present in Chicago. Each rock was the site for an "opening" for the honorees on May 22, 1993; the monuments stayed in place through the summer.²¹ The second and final part of Full Circle was an international dinner party at Hull House in September 1993 for 14 well-known women leaders who discussed their visions of the future.²²

The Monuments to Women claimed space, adding a new perspective to downtown buildings in Chicago.²³ In Fig. 5, the boulders are visible on the plaza in front of Daley Center, the 1965 response by C. F. Murphy Associates to the City-County Building just across the street.²⁴

The plaza is dominated by a monumental sculpture (1966) by Pablo Picasso. Some boulders were placed at locations that have particular resonance for women's history in the Loop, others were put where women have been notably absent or excluded. While the Monuments were in place, they acted as gathering spots, seats, points at which people paused, conversed, and/or changed directions. The Loop, a circle of sorts inscribed by the elevated train tracks, was redrawn by "Full Circle" in rocks placed within its perimeter. Then ceremonies honoring women moved out from the Circle to strengthen and enlarge upon the traditions of Chicago women. Lacy's work belongs to the best art that takes the tensions and disparities in life as we know it and constructs a temporal and spatial matrix that can transform the individual and perhaps some institutions.

Spatial matrices make interaction, conversation or at least encounters hard to avoid. These encounters do not necessarily have to be with strangers that threaten or crowds that overwhelm. Given the appropriate scale and frequency of complex, interconnected spaces, one could enjoy a neighborhood or a block with citizens becoming friends. Doing errands with children, for example, could turn into an outing with fountains, obstacle courses and perform-

ances, depending on the public spaces along the way. In shopping malls or hotel atria, objects as small as a mailbox, a lamp post or a boulder can provide enough room for a conversation.

Implicit to multiuse spaces is that more than one thing is happening at once. Architects and others can design "in the openings" of existing single-use buildings to enhance the interactions among users, passersby and the site. In new projects, designers can provide for flexibility, complexity and connectedness by culling lessons from the past about "how buildings learn".

What if, instead of specializing further, of narrowing one's expertise to fill a market niche, we *broadened* the role of the architect when possible? What if the architect were an environmental educator? A political organizer? A community liaison between the history of the built environment and the inhabitants?²⁵ Given the dearth of new architectural jobs and the sorry state of many cities, these broader roles could benefit many. The significance of place and the power of space is enhanced by a conscious acknowledgement of the theatrical qualities of architectural designs. People act on and in the spaces we create. Let us design for interactions that will promote civic life and democratic change.

Notes

1. Paul Valéry, "Four Fragments from *Eupalinos or the Architect*," in *Selected Writings*, translated by William McC. Stewart (New York: New Directions, 1950): 175. Valéry's ideas often are inconsistent. For example, he sees the author, the work of art, and the reader as independent of each other; direct communication between author and reader is not the goal of art for him. However, the extreme form of this idea would result in incomprehensible works of art. See Rene Wellek, *Four Critics: Croce Valéry Lukacs Ingarden* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981): 20-21. In contrast to Valéry, I am interested in enhancing the communicative powers of the
2. Perla Korosec-Serfaty, ed., *Appropriation of Space: Proceedings of the 3rd International Architectural Psychology Conference* (Strasbourg, 1976): 7. Korosec-Serfaty defines space appropriation as "the various modes and degrees of possession of or mastery over space...".
3. Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).
4. Annie Gottlieb, *Do You Believe in Magic? The Second Coming of the 60s Generation* (New York: Times Books, 1987): 351.
5. Howard Kissel, "Donna Henes's art: Of eggs

- and knots and community rites," *Women's Wear Daily* (August 28, 1984): 20.
6. Sharon Irish, "Cass Gilbert's New York Custom House, Bowling Green," M. A. thesis (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University, 1982); Michael Richman, *Daniel Chester French: An American Sculptor* (Washington, D. C., Preservation Press, 1976): 103–111.
 7. William Hubbard, *Complicity and Conviction: Steps toward an Architecture of Convention* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1980). Hubbard labeled the architecture designed with Cass Gilbert's approach, "scenographic." Scenographic designs, according to Hubbard, effectively gained an audience and, for a time, the audience was complicit in the illusion the architecture created. The monuments looked the way a certain segment of the population thought they ought to look.
 8. Diana Agrest, "Architecture from Without: Body, Logic, and Sex," *Assemblage* 7 (October 1988): 37.
 9. Mary McLeod, "Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism," *Assemblage* 8 (February 1989): 23.
 10. William H. Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (New York: Doubleday, 1988): 109.
 11. Founded in 1983, The Power of Place is a non-profit corporation that promotes new approaches to urban design, public art and historic preservation. See Dolores Hayden, Gail Dubrow and Carolyn Flynn, *The Power of Place: Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: The Power of Place, 198–): n. p.
 12. Andrea Kahn, "The Invisible Mask," in *Drawing/Building/Text: Essays in Architectural Theory*, edited by Andrea Kahn (New York: Princeton University Press, 1991): 86.
 13. Dana Cuff, *Architecture: The Story of Practice* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991): 94.
 14. Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994).
 15. Anne Vernez-Moudon, "Introductory Review," *Advances in Tall Buildings*, edited by Lynn S. Beedle for the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986): 3.
 16. Karen A. Franck, "A Feminist Approach to Architecture: Acknowledging Women's Ways of Knowing," in Ellen Perry Berkeley and Matilda McQuaid, *Architecture: A Place for Women* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989): 203. Complexity is central to the designs of Lucien Kroll as well. His *Composants*, published in Belgium in 1983, was translated into English as *The Architecture of Complexity* by Peter Blundell Jones in 1986 (London: B. T. Batsford).
 17. Whyte, p. 55. See n. 10 above.
 18. Moira Roth, "Suzanne Lacy: Social Reformer and Witch," in *Art in the Public Interest*, edited by Arlene Raven (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989): 158–62.
 19. See Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: New American Library [1910], 1960).
 20. For details on Chicago's City-County Building, see Robert Bruegmann's *Holabird and Roche/Holabird and Root* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991).
 21. As of this writing (October 1994), the Public Art Group of the City of Chicago is attempting to find a permanent site for the boulders.
 22. Some of the women who attended the international dinner party included: Polish sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz; Korean feminist theologian Hyun-Kyung Chung; Johnnetta Cole, president of Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia; feminist activist and novelist Nawal El-Saadawi; journalist Susan Faludi; law professor Anita Hill; farm labor activist Dolores Huerta; Indian economist and advisor to the United Nations Center for Women and Development, Devaki Jain; and Wilma Mankiller, former chief of the Cherokee Nation. A catalogue published by Bay Press documenting Lacy's project as well as other "Culture in Action" programs, with

- essays by Mary Jane Jacob and Michael Brenson, will be available in early 1995 from Sculpture Chicago, 20 North Michigan Avenue, Suite 400, Chicago, IL 60602.
23. For a helpful guide to Chicago women and history, see Marilyn A. Domer, et al., *Walking With Women Through Chicago History* (Chicago: Salsedo Press, 1981).
24. On Chicago's Daley Center (formerly the Civic Center) see Carl W. Condit, *Chicago 1930-70: Building, Planning and Urban Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974): 134-141.
25. Michael S. Owen, associate professor of architecture at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington, has used his studio classes as opportunities to organize for change in nearby communities. He and his students presented their work in October 1993 in Cincinnati, Ohio, at the "Crossing Boundaries" conference mentioned below. Together with community leaders in Toppenish, Washington, they have worked to improve housing and living conditions for migrant workers.

A version of this paper was presented at "Crossing Boundaries in Practice," a conference in Cincinnati, Ohio, in October of 1993 jointly sponsored by the Forum on Built Form and Culture Research and the Center for the Study of the Practice of Architecture. The author thanks David Saile, one of the conference organizers, for his support. Partial funding for the research came from the Research Board and the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Sharon Irish is a Visiting Assistant Professor in Art History, School of Art and Design, and a Graduate College Scholar in the School of Architecture, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, USA.