Culture Malls

By Roberta Brandes Gratz, journalist, urban critic and author

At about 5 or 6 p.m. on any given day, the vast empty plaza at Lincoln Center begins to come to life. Theater, concert, ballet goers begin to dribble in, a few coming early to eat at an on-campus restaurant added long after the Center was built. By 8, when the various curtains go up, emptiness again dominates, until, of course, the end of the evening when everyone is rushing home. In summer, the plaza turns into a lively outdoor entertainment space, the kind of programmed activity needed to enliven an otherwise mostly silent space and in contrast to a well-designed park that creates its own spontaneous activity by virtue of its unique design personality and community of users.



Lincoln Center's plaza attracts few people most days

Lincoln Center was probably the country's earliest Culture Mall, a Robert Moses Urban Renewal special started in the late 1950s and opened in the mid- 1960s. Let it first be said loud and clear that anything said here about the Center's **urban design** does not reflect on the Center's fabulous **menu of cultural offerings**. Sensitivities are such that any criticism of Lincoln Center as a place, a phenomenon, a form of city building is invariably interpreted as a criticism of it as a center of great artistic presentations. What I say here is strictly about Lincoln Center as a physical Culture Mall, a destructive form fraudulently presented as a means for urban revitalization. There are already too many Lincoln Center Culture Mall imitations in cities around the country. They differ in design, in choice of star architect, in combination of cultural offerings but, essentially, they are just variations on a theme, some designed better than others. It is time to mothball the concept of a collection of cultural venues in one place with a few added attractions – i.e. a restaurant, a library, or such thrown in. Just as the idea of widespread clearance for renewal has been shown not to be a valid form of urban rebirth – it actually never was – the idea of a collection of cultural offerings in one place has never been more than a false instrument of city building.

Diller, Scifidio + Renfru redesigned Lincoln Center in the early years of the 21st Century to repair what was possible of the original design. They took down the bridge over 65th Street, renewed street level activity, created a free standing lawn with a restaurant tucked underneath and redesigned Alice Tully Hall and Juilliard School to make them more streetside friendly. What a contrast to the original: a self-contained center without streets, without any connection to its surrounding urban fabric, without anything to relate to its neighbors. In fact, it created a disgraceful, racist blank wall -- probably 10 feet or more high-- with no activity and no entrances on the west side public housing of the complex. The Center sat alone in isolated glory for five decades and could just as well be in the Mojave Desert.

Lincoln Center and its imitators were often promoted as a new Rockefeller Center. Ridiculous. Rockefeller Center is a collection of thirteen buildings containing an assortment of urban functions, designed by an assortment of architects but built by one developer over a number of years. Perhaps most amazing and significant is its underground concourse that ties all the buildings together and provides easy passage to mass transit without making the street obsolete. It is even difficult to recognize where the parking garage is. Rockefeller Center has mixed uses, street level retail on all facades, a public amenity – the skating rink and Channel Gardens – that is a real people magnet all day and all year long. There is never a quiet deserted moment in the place, the antithesis of Culture Malls. And, of course, Rockefeller Center is comfortably and appropriately connected to its surrounding mid-town neighborhood. It actually added a street; culture malls remove streets.

Culture Malls are everything a city isn't. They are self-contained without streets, without any connection to the surrounding fabric, without mixed uses and, to top it off, without anything to relate to neighbors. And they do one additional harmful thing: they take the potential energy and cultural activity away from elsewhere in a city, any city, that always needs cultural anchors spread around. There are singular theaters all over New York City – some built post Lincoln Center – that fit in as a friendly neighbor that enhances the diversity of the area's uses and people without overwhelming it.

To understand what is an appropriate planning and design alternative, one has to fully comprehend the similarities among civic, cultural or shopping malls and how they are all alien schemes imposed on the texture of a singular place. They don't mend torn pieces of urban fabric. They destroy what exists. They replace. They are imbued with revitalization attributes they don't deserve. When the promise does not follow construction, few care enough to look back to recognize the mistaken assessment. It is too late anyway.

Sometimes the aftermath of one of these creations gives the deceptive appearance of a revitalizing impact. A surrounding neighborhood sprouts restaurants and bars, rehearsal studios and maybe music stores, luxury apartment houses and, if they're lucky, subsidized housing for performers. But such evaluations ignore what was lost, what remnants of neglected real community was left for genuine urban rebirth never given a chance to succeed.

Few remember, and probably fewer care, that Lincoln Center replaced 1,647 families and 383 businesses in 188 building, many of them the kind of brownstones and small apartment houses for which people are eager to pay extraordinary sums today. The past recedes from memory all too quickly. We are accustomed to accepting change in the name of progress without taking a questioning look backward.

Today, that kind of massive clearance would probably not happen. The alternative, however, has a similar less recognizable result—the total replacement of a place and a community. The means are different and more subtle, less obvious and always accomplished gradually.

So let's consider an alternative approach that adds up to real rebirth and renewal, rebirth for the remnant community that still exists and renewal for an area for which a cultural or civic facility would mean a beneficial expansion of diversity. Clearance would be kept at a minimum. Financing programs would be available in the beginning to nearby property owners and residents to keep them in place during the inevitable ensuing change; the whole assortment of financial tools available to Developers who will eagerly come to replace what exists. In other words, this would mean tax breaks, low-interest mortgages and other tools never available to the in place property owner but always available to the outside developer. Let there also be financial breaks and tax incentives for small business owners like there long have been for mall and chain stores; let these financial advantages only be available to the small and let there be even bigger ones available to the truly local.

Leave streets open and in place, parking garages smaller and, perhaps, scattered. Make sure nearby transit is available or created. Localities always know how to build access roads and other car-oriented facilities; now they should apply the same skills to providing transit. And, not to be forgotten, are the public amenities necessary for vibrant communities, either left in place if existing or added if necessary, a small compensation for the disruptive addition of a major new activity. This, of course, means parks, libraries, schools. The result will be reborn places with a singular culture attraction added and a neighborhood rebuilt. There is no such thing as a foregone deteriorated neighborhood that can't be reborn in this manner with a new cultural offering added to the city's menu. This can mean genuine urban rebirth instead of the illusion of rebirth with a cultural mall making deception easy.