

## Welcome

Welcome and Happy New Year. Continuing with our recent initiative for theme-based newsletters, this winter issue looks at modern plazas and landscapes. Many of these were created in the context of urban renewal projects in the postwar era as an integral part of the design of housing, civic, office or cultural institutions or simply as stand alone features. Many of these spaces and places have not been maintained and have fallen into disrepair or have been abandoned in their entirety, serving as symbols of urban blight and failed design principles or social views. In recent years, so much has changed and so many alterations have been made to what are important designs and represent work by significant designers of the period that we believe it is important to dedicate a newsletter to this issue. We want to highlight the significance of these landscapes and advocate for their preservation in a meaningful and appreciative way. Too many of these landscapes or spaces have become the victim of unnecessary and insensitive changes, or have been obliterated altogether because of poor or inappropriate maintenance or misbegotten ideas about safety or use.

2007 saw the continued growth of DOCOMOMO US with the addition of Florida as a US chapter and entry of New Orleans and North Carolina for approval. The end of 2007 had its usual array of building preservation challenges. While the emblematic Encounter restaurant at LAX airport was reopened, the Morris A. Mechanic Theater in Baltimore was nominated for designation and the Brutalist Third Church of Christ, Scientist in Washington D.C. was designated. Many others remain uncertain: the fate of Albert Ledner's O'Toole building in New York City is tied to the expansion plans of St. Vincent's hospital, and the future of such corporate campuses as Eero Saarinen's Bell Labs in Holmdel, New Jersey, remains unresolved.

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## Urban Renewal Renewed: A Makeover for Baltimore's Center Plaza

In the heart of Baltimore, 1960s-style urban renewal has received a facelift with the completion in October 2007 of a \$7.5 million renovation of Center Plaza, the urban plaza at the core of downtown's complex of office, retail and residential buildings known as Charles Center. In 2002,



**Center Plaza under construction, with Mies van der Rohe's One Charles Center on the right, April 2007. Charles Center, Baltimore, MD** (photo: Olivia Klose)

a national competition was held for the re-design of the unpopular and rundown Center Plaza, originally designed by the Baltimore firm of Rogers, Taliaferro, Kostriksky & Lamb as the focal point of Baltimore's first urban renewal project and inspired by the great urban plazas of the Italian Renaissance. The local architecture and design firm of Brown & Craig won the competition with their design of extensive greenscaping, a reflecting pool, movable seating and dynamic lighting effects. Brown & Craig had collaborated with Daniel Biederman, the talent behind the successful revitalization of New York City's Bryant Park in the early 1990s; however, it is too early to tell whether the team's design will foster the desired transformation of Center Plaza into a hip and inviting urban space.

As originally designed, Charles Center's open spaces reflected the principles and ideals of the urban renewal movement that swept through American cities beginning in the 1950s, forever transforming the urban landscape. As consulting architects to the Charles Center urban renewal project, which was launched by a public-private partnership in 1957, RTKL's goal was to make the plazas and open space a "social center for 24-hour citizens of Baltimore." The 1958 Charles Center promotional report gushed that "Here, open space will be used, loved and economically successful because it will be full of pleasant things: fountains, sculpture, flowers, umbrellas, flags and trees. The open space will be, in its own way, as concentrated as the city around it." George Kostriksky of RTKL envisioned an urban landscape along the themes of light, sculpture, and water, for Charles, Center and Hopkins plazas, respectively. The three plazas, located on the interior of the two superblocks comprising the Charles Center urban renewal site, were to be linked through a series of elevated walkways,

escalators and skywalks in order to overcome the problem of the site's steep topography (a 68-foot drop in grade from the northern boundary of the site to the southern boundary) and in order to create a series of "pedestrian islands." Though futuristic in appearance, this circulation system was a typical component of urban design of the



**Center Plaza under construction, April 2007. Charles Center, Baltimore, MD** (photo: Olivia Klose)

1950s and 60s and was often promoted as a means of separating pedestrians from the escalating nuisance of auto traffic and congestion. In the case of Charles Center, the exterior circulation system was also intended to provide a venue for extensive retail activity.

Although the Charles Center plan had all the right ingredients for successful place-making, its physical realization made plain many of the shortcomings of modern urban design principles. In the words of Charles Center's chief urban planner himself, David Wallace, the skywalks at Charles Center were "circuitous and hard to find," and retail was consistently "lackluster." City government did not end up retaining ownership of the entire system of open spaces and exterior infrastructure (only the three plazas), and so treatment of its various sections—in terms of services, amenities, ambiance and maintenance—was left up to individual building owners and retail tenants. The first skywalks were dismantled in the 1980s, and by the 1990s only two remained.

The introverted nature of the Charles Center plan was a built-in handicap and prevented the lively, populous atmosphere envisioned by planners. Placement of the two major plazas, Center and Hopkins Plazas, on the interior of the superblocks meant that they were virtually invisible from the street. Fixed seating, copious hardscaping, and insufficient greenery all contributed to the plazas' underuse. As early as 1962, a member of Baltimore's Planning Council predicted that the majority of plaza users would be office tenants on their lunch break, and that a mere quarter would be the visitors, shoppers and tourists envisioned. A distinct obstacle to the plazas' popularity stemmed not from design, but perhaps from the absence of integrated planning:

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## Changes to Halprin's Freeway Park

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another vision for the park. Mr. Robertson understands the gravity of his position as a link between the past and future of the park, and it was his appreciation for this responsibility that sent him to Marin County in the early fall to speak with Mr. Halprin. In addition to speaking with Mr. Halprin, Mr. Robertson discussed his ideas with himself and two of Halprin's previous collaborators and employees: Stephen Koch and Dai Williams. Together, the four men discussed the various design and horticultural constraints of the current state of Freeway Park. Mr. Halprin confirmed that the plants were subservient to the other elements of the design, like the water features in the foreground and the city in the background, and also talked about how the revised planting palette—including larch, pine, oxydendron, japanese maple and hemlock—should be, as Robertson phrased it, "robust and masculine," to reflect the original design intent.

While the future of Halprin and Danadjieva's design legacy continues to improve with increased awareness of the import of this design and urban planning landmark, permanent protections remain elusive. A Seattle landmarks nomination submitted in 2005 continues to remain in limbo despite the desire of the Landmarks Preservation Board to formally embrace this unique legacy. The central sticking point is also what makes Freeway Park so unique. The Washington State Department of Transportation and the City of Seattle have been trying to establish who has jurisdiction over landmarking property that is within the leased air rights over Interstate 5. With so many historic properties associated with the Interstate Highway system, the resolution of this cross-boundary dispute may prove fateful for the modernist objects, landscapes and buildings across the country.

—Brice Maryman

*Portions of this article were previously published on The Cultural Landscape Foundation's website written by Brice Maryman and Liz Birkholz.*

## Urban Renewal Renewed

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**Hopkins Plaza after renovation, April 2007. Charles Center, Baltimore, MD.** (photo: Olivia Klose)

several of the Charles Center office buildings offered subsidized cafeterias, thus keeping office workers inside for lunch. Ultimately, the sheer scale of Charles Center, the fact of separate building ownership, and the overall decline in downtown retail activity were major factors working against the visual and spatial cohesion of the entire site, and likely prevented the plazas from assuming the status of clearly defined destinations within the city, regardless of the aesthetic merit of their individual design schemes.

In many ways, the emphasis on movement and variety as a visual theme has stayed the same from the original design to the new one; it is perhaps only in the execution of this theme that Brown & Craig's design seeks to differentiate itself from the original and announce Center Plaza as a 21st century urban destination. Bryce Turner of Brown & Craig describes Center Plaza's intended transformation, saying that "As [designers] developed their version of plazas in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a 'Jetsonian' view that incorporated lots of hardscape. Now we have found it is important to have more soft spaces". Their design incorporates the ten key principles that made Bryant Park a resounding success, most notably monumental sculpture as a focal point, movable seating and outdoor cafes, greenscaping (as opposed to hardscaping), and ambient nighttime lighting.

There is undoubtedly increased attention to the urban spaces of Charles Center, with the opening in 2001 of Johns Hopkins University's Downtown Center at the southeast corner of the site, and with the imminent redevelopment of the 1967 Morris Mechanic Theater, located on Hopkins Plaza. With enough retail investment—an important prescription in Brown & Craig's plan and the focus of the Mechanic's redevelopment—Center Plaza will benefit from the most important ingredient of any public space: people.

—Olivia Klose

## Landscapes of Industrial Archeology

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In 2001 UNESCO had inscribed the whole colliery and coking plant ensemble of Zollverein into the World Heritage List, because "it constitutes remarkable material evidence of the evolution and decline of the coal industry over the past 150 years." The whole area has been converted into an anchor point along the European route of industrial heritage. The last completed conversion of an industrial plant is the transformation of the coal refinery building into a museum and visitors center, designed by the joint venture OMA/Heinrich Böll. The project was awarded the Deutscher Architekturpreis 2007.



**Utilization of recreational space. Landschaftspark, North-Duisburg, Germany.** (photo: Franco Panzini)

After the German results of creative conversion of decommissioned plants, brownfields and mine sites in order to establish new post-industrial landscapes, similar experiments have found a certain diffusion all around Europe. One of the most amazing new proposals comes from France. In 2003, the Louvre announced a competition to create a regional branch of the museum in Lens (northern region of Pas de Calais), on a site of over twenty hectares that was a former mine yard. The decision to build the new museum in the former mine yard is highly symbolic for a region that has suffered much in the past, from both war and from intensive coal-mining followed by the closing of the last pit in 1986. The international architecture competition to design the future Musée du Louvre-Lens was launched in early 2005. The winning team was the Japanese architectural practice Sanaa (Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa), together with the American museum architects Celia Imrey and Tim Culbert, and the French landscape designer Catherine Mosbach. The design of the museum and the new public spaces that will be opened in 2010 consists of nine pavilions in glass and steel, partly set into the ground with roof glazing. The group of buildings blends in with the surrounding post-industrial environment, creating a totally new perspective for a future based on the binomial culture-open spaces, without losing sight of the glorious industrial heritage.

—Maristella Casciato