Does the Vision Stick?

Donlyn Lyndon

The State of Illinois Center in Chicago offers an extraordinary example of the public realm as conceived in the 1980s. It is a building that belongs to the public, to the people of the State of Illinois, but it does not house the representative public spaces of government. It is not a place for convening. The legislature does not meet here; it is not the place of public debate. It is rather a place of businesslike transactions, a place for bureaucratic operations and for the legislators and the governor to meet with their staffs and constituents. It is where bills are paid, legislation is drafted, and deals are made, not the stuff with which to represent the public. It is a workaday place that houses activities scarcely distinguishable from the activities that shaped the boxy skyline of Chicago even though their consequences may profoundly affect the citizens of the state.

To an eye trained in urban civilities, the exterior of the building is an affront. On two sides, it is covered with a pastiche of cheap-looking, scaleless curtain wall panels that call to mind a diverse array of offensive buildings from the 1950s (chiefly the Jack Tar Hotel in San Francisco and the Prudential Tower in Boston). This effect is neither diminished nor made more interesting by being carried around the other sides as fragments of a false front scattered across the edge of the plaza space. These fragments of wall, trivial as they are, bear some analysis. What role do they play in creating a public realm? I think none. They are not shaped to accommodate anyone. They are too thin and harsh to lean against or sit within. The materials and colors belong more to the world of buses and cars than to the world of touch. And the fragments of wall they purport to represent do not enfront the street or make any other notable urban gesture because they are not large enough to define the edge of the space or to enclose the plaza within. They are, from the discernable evidence in the place itself, simply a gimmick, the trace of a design move not made, an announcement (hardly necessary one would suppose) that the building does not fill out the block. They make the citizen aware, perhaps, that this is an unprecedented building, a curiosity, perhaps even a joke. One can't help but suppose that their more explicit purpose was to demonstrate the architect's awareness of what passes (or once passed, since it's now several years later) for architectural knowledge in the early 1980s, namely, that an "urban building" fills the block; that fragments of a well-known form may be suggestive of the whole; that curtain wall panels are simply the skin of a building; and (most vociferously) that the interdictions of Mies van der Rohe no longer hold sway in Chicago. These are useful insights for architects perhaps but not precisely the stuff of which great public visions are made. In any case, the execution of these fragments is too thin to bear further exploration, too obvious to sustain inquiry. The gesture that was fragmented was neither strong enough nor relevant enough to bear dissolution. In short, the fragments are a throwaway line in the midst of a big show.

The big show, of course, is inside, and it is indeed quite a show. The sun shines into an astonishingly large rotunda-atrium that is roofed and walled on two sides with glass—a winter garden like none you've ever seen or, more closely still, a launching platform awaiting its missile. All of it is provisional, with no effort at explanation. The walls of the drum are a miasma of open-railed passages and walls dissolved in mirrored colors. Great openwork stairs similar to the fire escapes that once threaded across the back alley silhouettes of Chicago lead the eye up toward the roof from which they hang. Only in the roof trusses is there comprehensible pattern: a network of trusses with no discernible means of support. This is an environment, not a structure, a fantastic act of will that is to be taken at face value, dressed in a stagey coverall of technical ingenuity. It yields neither to empathy nor to inquisition. It is simply a phenomenon, a show you won't forget.

The bottom several floors are filled with shops and restaurants, a multilevel space of the sort that is familiar now from shopping centers, but it is nonetheless engaging as a peopled scene, with movements in all directions on several levels, flowing escalators, exposed elevators, tables and chairs galore, and plenty of railings to lean out over and survey the passing scene. Not surprisingly, on a

Saturday morning the main floor was filled with extras being filmed walking briskly through, sauntering provocatively along the balcony rail, stopping in the midst of paths to exchange a last few words. It was as though they were filming a William H. Whyte extravaganza, with costuming that was suitably diverse (though perhaps just a bit too natty) and with a racial mix that was commendably balanced. It was altogether believable, not stranger, really, than any other of the fictions of urbane city life that have been constructed in Chicago's Loop and the various central business districts of America.

These fictions follow three general modes: Captains of Industry, Patrons of Rationality, and Art and Entrepreneurs of Environment. There are buildings of the early part of the century that construct a world of tight streets, classically derived orders, and stone. They project a world of Captains of Industry carrying civilization and technology forward with the help of a dutiful crew. The matrons of the crew are provided great places to shop in. The seriousness of the enterprise was manifested in permanent materials, stone (or terra cotta meant to look like stone), and carefully contrived details executed with a craftsman's skill (or manufactured to seem so—skill once or twice removed, but a craft mastered one way or another).

This vision of urbanity was gradually cheapened until it lost authority and was swept away by the Patrons of Rationality and Art,

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6 Entry colonnade.
Photograph by James R. Steinkamp.

who conceived the city (with a lot of encouragement from architects) as a plane upon which to dispose idealized objects, unblemished by any evidence of the tawdry world of daily provisions. This can be seen most clearly in the federal office building, next door to the new state office building. It is on a flat paved plaza with a flat paved glass lobby and a giant work of Picasso standing forth alone in the wind. This building is serious, still, clearly, carefully, almost painfully studied. Its architects were intent on doing it just right, on being approved for the care with which each act of building was considered.

Now we have the era of consumers having fun. Urban life here and elsewhere has been conceived by the Entrepreneurs of Environment as an extended lunch hour, a pageant of casual encounters and festive shopping, with evocative environments cast around in evident unseriousness.

The respective urban scenes, the public realms that are thus constructed, vary in their import, in the visions of collective life they call forward. What difference do they make? Are we moved by their respective messages? Does the vision stick? Are there standards to apply? What might we expect from a suitable public realm? The answers all depend on the power and purpose of myth and whether myths can be constructed or, of necessity, must grow out of the rampant energies of society as they intersect with the permanent conditions of being.

In a conventional public building, the symbolism is all established and directed; the building forms are representative, and its inhabitants are assigned appropriate roles. The mode is one made familiar in government buildings throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the Chicago state office building, everything is a part of the spectacle, but your use of it is undirected. The spectacle is a casually related event that hovers over a set of transactions and activities that are formed freely within it. It is a monument simply to the act of being there. It has no designated meanings; it is instead a memorable form to which people will attach their own asociations, a framework that they are free to fill out with the stuff of their own daily lives. Yet on this scale, and with the weight of significance the state building necessarily bears, this seems not enough. It should refer beyond itself if to nurture a common bond for its citizens is a part of its intent.

Ten years ago or so I argued, in an article titled "Five Ways to People Places," that architecture should turn our attention to people, should remind us, in so far as it can, that we live among others and that each is a center of initiative and imagination. Our culture needs, I contend, to care more about its participants and less about technology and power and abstraction.

It seemed then that the new breed of shopping environment that was developing was exciting and hopeful, that we could discover that it was really in the pleasures of human exchange that our public realm would find meaning and purpose. It seems less so now. Showing people to each other has merits but not enough. The scene is amusing but not gratifying. Being in the throng may bring a rush of either terror or recognition, but it does not sustain attention. Watching people mill past objects they might buy, commit themselves to environments and foods of diverse origins, stand in line at the banking machine, or stare blankly at other people is not a way of learning much, especially if what we see mirrors ourselves. What we wish to know and learn, what we wish to encounter, are qualities of mind and sympathy, to observe how others deal with each other, to learn of their works, to recognize lineage and invention, to be made aware of qualities that we might emulate or recommend unto our children. We wish, in fact, to find through our encounters with the public some forms of ethical thought.

This would lead us, I presume to seek a public realm that would encourage investigation, that would let us see people through the medium of their works, to judge actions in relation to context. We would seek a public realm of true encounters, where it is possible to make judgments regarding the appropriateness of observed responses, to perceive the mind and sensibility at work. Following this line of thought will lead us to the importance of formalization—setting things into a frame of

reference that distances perceptions and sets a context for examination. Returning to the State of Illinois Center, it would appear that its proposition that state bureaucratic work is like any other but affiliated with a more wonderous scene may be seen on the one hand as a useful deflation of pomp. On the other hand, it can be seen as inherently corrupting, with government understood to be just another form of business—in this case housed in a building that is callous in its disregard for convention and bent on a form of display that creates spectacle in and for itself without mediating intentions.

The one obvious effort to make a symbolic tie to civic tradition is the placement in its recessed center of a paving pattern directly related to that of the Campidoglio on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. Whether wholly or only half-intended to make the connection with Rome, the gesture is hollow. The paving of the Campidoglio is on a convex form, recalling the hill on which it sits, and is occupied in its center by a statue of Marcus Aurelius, a revered tie with the earlier Rome. The Chicago paving is flat and empty. Chicago is flat, too, but one could hardly suppose that underneath that floor there is earth. Indeed earth is hard to imagine here at all. We stand not between earth and sky, as Christian Norberg-Schulz would have it, but enmeshed in webs of steel, glass, and hype.

Perhaps you will say, "What's wrong with creating a great people place with all the means available to you? Chicago can always use another tourist attraction. What could be better than to create a memorable spectacle that can be identified with the life of the state."

It would be better to make the public realm in ways that sustain investigation, that accommodate many imaginings; to make settings in which one can attend to the transactions of people on issues that matter. It would be better to give a structure for experiencing individuals in the public realm, for being able to know and understand the works of men and women from dimensions of time that exceed the present. Solidity in time is not easily achieved, and in this building it is hard enough to grasp and difficult to imagine keeping a storehouse of civic memories.

To grasp and keep (to use Christian Norberg-Schulz's terms) has an unfortunately acquisitive tone, because it is so easily associated with things rather than with concepts. Yet our personalities are made up of those memories and response patterns that we keep. And our collective life, the public of which we can become a part, is that set of ideas and experiences that we hold in common with others. The way in which these are represented and made concrete in the spaces that we share is a major qualifier of how we consider each other. It is a matter for contention, then, whether our buildings and public places would have us believe that individuals are important; whether they would remind us of the thoughts and considerations our predecessors have given to similar circumstances; whether they embellish our perceptions of place and serve as discernable landmarks in the construction of our public persona, whether they intimate that there is importance in times that will follow.