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Shaper of the Civic Landscape



Dance Theatre of Harlem
Photo © James Morse

For twenty-five years, New York City has been clawing its way back from the depths of fiscal crisis, seemingly out-of-control crime and housing abandonment, and the near-collapse of its infrastructure. The turnaround was noticeable to New Yorkers by the early 1990s—well before the election of the city’s law-and-order mayor and Wall’s Street boom—and was especially evident in the face of the city’s public spaces.

Just as the proclamations of New York City’s death were premature, so were the eulogies about the demise of the city’s great public spaces. But just as New York is a very different city from that of the booming post-war decades, so is the current notion of what public spaces are, and what it takes to make them succeed.

Nowadays, the city rarely takes on great public works itself, as it did in the days when Olmsted and Vaux oversaw the design and construction of Central and Prospect parks, or when Robert Moses created a vast realm of playgrounds, parks and beaches (as well as highways and housing projects).

Today the lines are blurred, with public-private partnership, community participation and inter-

disciplinary collaboration creating in many respects a more complex process of building and managing public works. And this blurring reminds us that between the extremes of public and private places, there is a vast spectrum of places share attributes of both. Paradoxically, it is this complication of matters that has so expanded the prospects for the civic realm.

More than most architects in the city, Hugh Hardy is associated with the projects that are considered to be part of this revival of New York’s civic realm. From historic to new theaters around Times Square, from the Rainbow Room to Radio City Music Hall at Rockefeller Center, from modest park facilities to performance and administrative spaces for cultural organizations located in neighborhoods outside Manhattan’s cultural districts, Hardy and his firm have again and again given form to New York’s new civic landscape.

It’s not just that Hardy and his firm, HHPA, have had the right clients, it’s also that the places they design seem just right, connecting us those places in a manner that transcends the traps of nostalgia, doctrinaire preservation, corporate timidity and architectural iconoclasm that



Left: Radio City Music Hall
Photo by Whitney Cox,
© Radio City Music Hall Archives

Right: Joyce Theater, Chelsea
Photo © Norman McGrath

characterize into which so many similar projects fall. The Joyce Theatre jazzes up its Chelsea surroundings, serving as a spark for the neighborhood, rather than swamping it, as so many urban entertainment projects unfortunately do. The New Victory and New Amsterdam theaters actually calm Times Square down; they are two of a handful of spaces in the area that encourage serious reflection about the role of architecture and public space in such a dynamic setting. Hardy's restoration teams somehow found more glory in the The Rainbow Room and Radio City Music Hall than had been remembered, yet in subtle ways—what is it about the colors of the seat covers now, or of the new marquee lighting, that makes those places better than they were?

Then there are the projects that aren't yet on the public agenda. In those cases, civic design activism is called for. In these pages, Hardy has highlighted two of the projects he has helped champion: a new streetscape for 110th Street in Harlem and the reclamation of the High Line, an abandoned elevated railway in Chelsea, for public open space. The first project extends the reach of New York's revival to a place that has not

so readily enjoyed its benefits; the second challenges the agenda of tear-down-and-redevelop, offering instead a vision for a new kind of public space in the city.

Certainly, edgier, bolder, more visionary proposals for New York's public realm have been advanced in recent years. Hardy's work is remarkable in a different way. Again and again, it coaxes more out of a place than we knew was there, it claims for us more of city life than we thought we could expect.

—*Todd W. Bressi*